

THE ASSIGNMENT

Twelve of us stood up and rushed for the door as the noon bell tolled. Sliding our chairs into each other we hoped to escape our capture now that the Thanksgiving break had officially begun. “Sit down!” ordered the dragon lady. Dean Lorraine Longmire, though far from ugly displayed a personality and demeanor that could be. The best-selling author and extraordinary writing professor evoked hate and admiration. She taught one elite writing class a year, and I was in it.

Every writing instructor worthy of a byline preaches, show don’t tell and write what you know. The dragon lady merely rubber stamped such feeble critiques unworthy of her onerous fountain pen annotations which some said she wrote in blood. Her legendary editing, though vexing made every one of us better writers. Her commentaries could anoint or annihilate future authors.

“THE ASSIGNMENT is to ferret out a cast of characters. Show them to me via their actions and dialogue. I want insight into their personalities. If you craft a setting or plot while doing so, I’ll consider giving extra credit. THE ASSIGNMENT is to be typed, double-spaced, and on my desk by eleven a.m. Monday. Enjoy your Thanksgiving break.”

What a bitch! It was Wednesday afternoon, tomorrow Thanksgiving, and Friday I’d be driving back to campus to work a big university party that night. Saturday’s football game would be an all-day and night affair whether we won or lost. Dean Longmire achieved tenure here two decades ago and knew all of this. She could care less about rivalry week or that our football

team would be playing for an invitation to a prestigious bowl game. I planned to go to the game and tailgate with my friends. Relegating THE ASSIGNMENT to Sunday was tantamount to Longmire pointing a gun at my knee cap and screaming, “Write!” It allowed no time for my masterpiece to marinate or rest before editing. Sunday would suck.

Sunday morning I sat at the kitchen table in a staring contest with my old Royal typewriter when my roommate walked in with freshly baked muffins. “Oh thank you! Thank you!”

“What’s wrong? Longmire spewing fire again?”

“Exactly,” as I explained THE ASSIGNMENT and how I had been sitting here for hours with nothing to show but three crumpled paper balls. For the fourth time this morning I fed paper into my typewriter and slammed the carriage to the right.

“What are you going to write about?”

“I have no idea,” I mumbled as I rested my hands on the keyboard and gazed at the sticky wine bottles and crushed beer cans overflowing the wastebasket. “I’m brain dead. Think!”

Suddenly, I was recalling my Thanksgiving break. It seems like a flurry of events that took place a week ago. I’m peeking through the curtain of my holiday hangover and looking at Friday’s party. President and Mrs. Greer’s gathering exceeded fifty guests, mostly university personnel, a few illustrious alums, and a sprinkling of community supporters. It proved to be an interesting mashup of personalities and characters.

Returning to campus after any holiday my first duty meant checking in with Bill the caterer. President of a small bank he once boasted he made more money catering. Walking into the bank, Bill’s assistant saw me and pressed the intercom. He looked out through the one-way glass, excused himself from colleagues and pointed to the conference room.

Neither tall nor fat he didn't resemble any of the chefs I knew. "Thanks for coming by Ian. Do you need any money?"

"I may need a little to buy books." Pulling a folded wad of bills the size of a double-cheeseburger from his front pants pocket Bill started peeling off Franklins, one hundred, two hundred. "Two hundred is plenty, Bill."

"Aw, take three. You can pay me back after a couple of jobs. Now listen to me. I need you at President Greer's house at five o'clock tonight. White shirt and bow tie. You got it? We're having strip steaks and lobsters, so come hungry."

Bill was the finest and most expensive caterer in town and everyone knew it. If you had to ask the price he was too expensive for you. When people saw me behind the bar they knew Bill was catering and the meal would be delicious.

I joked I would have worked for food but it was the truth. The pay and Bill's demeanor made the hard work and long hours worth it. His sense of humor and demanding nature put some people off but I loved working for the guy. I never thought the experience would do much for my resume or improve my writing... but I was wrong. That night turned out to be a Godsend.

I got to the president's home at 4:55, because in Bill's world, at five o'clock you were late. Unloading the van filled with heavy racks of dishes, food, and catering items came first. When hiring Bill, he supplied everything. He even brought his own mop, bucket and cleaning detergent. He only employed male servers and bartenders because of the heavy lifting and the one time he hired a female his demanding and gruff orders made her cry and vow never to return. A promise she kept.

"Ian, what do you want for dinner?"

"One steak, medium rare and two lobster tails."

“You got it.”

We ate what the guests ate and as much as we wanted. Just another reason we loved Bill and worked hard for him. “Get your bar set up and I’ll cook your steak.” I knew the house and routine. I positioned the five-foot table between the open French doors that led into the great room. Behind me and on his massive walnut desk a green-shaded lamp dimly lit President Greer’s office.

Opposite my bar the conservatory, a three-sided glass appendage filled with exotic orchids allowed highly oxygenated air to drift into the great room adding a moist woodsy scent. The cool air from the conservatory complimented the heat from the fireplace.

Mrs. Greer had deftly lit and adorned the room for the holiday season. The patina of the oak paneling and lighting gave off a welcome amber glow. The ribbon-laced greenery on the carved mantel and above the plantation shutters looked festive. Later, the flames from the fireplace would entertain admirers while they warmed their hands. Beyond the glass doors leading out to the terraced lawn, whirling leaves flew by. A huge oil painting above the fireplace featured a chocolate Labrador retriever with a limp quail in its jaws and a rustic horn of plenty spilling fall gourds onto a slate floor.

Groupings of loveseats and sage colored wingback chairs encouraged private conversations. The wheat-colored Berber carpet revealed several loose threads and a small worn spot in front of the fire. Above the wainscoting, a suede hunter-green paint proved to be a striking background for a matching pair of bloated bull prints. On every end-table sat coasters reminiscent of Greer family travels, along with bowls of nuts, pastel-colored almonds and dark chocolates in various sizes and shapes.

The scent of evergreens wafted a fresh forest fragrance through the room. Later the smell of sizzling steak with rivulets of melted butter would fill the air as the servers delivered the prime cuts and lobster tails resembling white-porcelain.

Hastily downing my meal I retreated to my station and readied it for Bill's inspection. The liquor bottles were corked with silver stoppers and placed in the center of the table in an arc around the ice bucket. Their replacements sat under the skirted table. I arranged three sizes of glasses on my left and mixers and garnishes on my right. "It looks good dummy." High praise by Bill's standards.

Ding, ding, dong, the distinctive sound of the door chimes were like the starting gun at a marathon. "Who is it?" whispered Mrs. Greer as her maid hurried to open the door.

"It's your friend, the book reviewer, Ms. Carson," she replied softly. I glanced at the blue French mantel clock reading 7:16. The first guest arrived appropriately late. In the next half hour, the chimes methodically welcomed each guest. Outside the blustery rain stripped the last of the foliage from the trees. Occasionally an autumn leaf snuck in with the guests and blended in on the Oriental rug. People entered with their coat collars turned up shielding their faces from the needling rain. As the Greers greeted guests they handed their hats and coats to the maid for storage in a nearby bedroom. The only invitee missing was the mystery celebrity.

I worked steadily pouring first rounds. Some of the people I recognized and remembered their drink preference. It made them smile. Others I looked in the eye and asked, "What would you like?"

"Good evening Dr. Endicott."

"Have me met?"

“No, I recognize you from your photos and some of my friends have taken your class.” Dr. Dylan Endicott came from Stanford University with rave reviews. He is a brilliant financial analyst but an unconventional hire by business school standards due to his liberal views and shoulder-length hair. A California dude with a gorgeous young wife who shared many of the same features. Both tall, they sported tans, smooth complexions, and long whitish-blond hair. He seems a bit full of himself and cocky. I imagine being one of the youngest people awarded a doctorate in business from Stanford and advisor to a billion-dollar tech startup could be the cause.

“We’ll have two vodka and tonics with a lemon and lime.”

“Yes, sir,” I said pouring the vodka then handing him both drinks.

“Hello young man,” said a barrel-chested older gentleman in a blue blazer with an iconic cotton ball embroidered on his lapel just above his name tag. “I’ll have a bourbon and water in a tall glass with very little water and no ice,” he stated in a heavy southern drawl. I poured as instructed, the equivalent of at least two drinks.

“Mr. Buford, I see the cotton ball on your blazer. Are you representing the Cotton Bowl?”

“Yes, I am. I’m probably going to offer the winner of tomorrow’s game an invitation.”

“Wow, I’ve never been to Dallas.”

“Y’all will probably have no reason to go there since I’m dang sure your team will lose tomorrow.”

“I’m not so sure about that. We’ve played a common opponent and beat them by more than our rival.”

“Oh, Sonny! Bless your heart,” he said as he walked away. I know the polite underlying meaning of that phrase...it’s the precursor to a southern insult that translates to “you are so dumb

or otherwise impaired, but you can't help it." And the way he said it I know that's how he felt. He should know, you never insult the bartender.

The majority of the guests are courteous and make an effort to smile and engage me in a conversation. "What year are you? What are you studying?" For those, I try to remember their drink preference and I am holding a bottle of their favorite liquor when they return.

Ms. Holly Carson, a petite size two and always impeccably dressed makes a beeline for me. Tonight, she is wearing a green velvet long-sleeved dress that stops well above her knee. She brushes back her pageboy hairdo exposing an alluring neckline. Wearing black patent leather high heels I can see on the toe of her shoe the reflection of her knee and sometimes higher. I've read her scathing book reviews in the New York Times. "Hello, Ian. I believe we must have a lot of the same friends?"

"Oh, I don't think so Ms. Carson."

"Of course we do. Why do you think we keep bumping into each other at parties?" We both laugh and I begin to make her a dirty gin martini with a few drops of olive juice and a single olive. I know that each refill I'm to add an olive until her glass comes back with a bite out of one of them. That is my signal to substitute water for the gin.

Here comes the representative from the Orange Bowl. I can tell by his lapel pin featuring a football player with an orange for a helmet. "A whiskey sour please."

"My pleasure Mr. Arturo." Guests are always surprised when I call them by name. I'm not sure why because they wear name tags. "Let me add some fresh fruit. How are you enjoying our weather?"

"Well, it's a little cooler than Miami but a nice change for me. Florida is a wonderful place from October till May but those hot humid summers seem to go on forever."

“I’d like a little break from this weather. What is the chance of going to Miami and watch our team play in the Orange Bowl?”

“Well I’m here to scout your team, but you know I can’t tell you anything. You’ll find out in a few days when the bowl announcements are made.”

“As soon as you make those announcements the airfares go sky high. Can’t you give me a little hint so I can book now and afford the trip?”

“Sorry, but thanks for the drink. Um, that’s good,” he says as he takes a sip and walks away.

Everyone is chatting and seems to be in a good mood. There’s a buzz about who the celebrity guest might be. A startling knock at the door causes a number of guests to take steps in that direction to see who it is.

I get a glimpse of the well-known celebrity. I recognize his boyish face and haircut. He’s debonair and his smile is so natural. Taking off his coat reveals a flawlessly tailored dark suit on a perfectly proportioned physique. A star of stage and screen, he can dance, sing, act, and he’s an alum. I should have guessed it. He introduces the young woman with him as his publicist. That’s it? No entourage? Of course, this celebrity is old school and universally admired. A man of the people and so humble considering his abundant talents and accomplishments.

As he hands his coat and maroon-banded cashmere fedora to the maid he asks, “Your name?”

“Margie,” she says softly, looking down and performing a slight curtsy.

“Thank you, Margie.”

For the next few minutes, a subtle feeding frenzy of adults trying to refrain from looking awestruck jockey to get closer. Our celebrity epitomizes graciousness, neither arrogant nor obnoxious like so many other entertainers.

After eight o'clock dinner is announced and the guests who know Bill's reputation are anxious to see what he has prepared. For the next hour, my bar will be closed and I'll help the staff serve dinner or do simple kitchen tasks.

Returning to my post people finished with their dinner begin wandering in my direction. After replenishing the ice, I look up and the celebrity appears in front of me. "Young man, I'd love a scotch on the rocks, if I may?"

"Of course, Mr. Kelly. It's so nice to have you here and my pleasure to serve you."

"Well, thank you. You know I did a little bartending before I got my break as an actor? It's good experience. Good luck to you," he said as he reached out and shook my hand.

I can't remember the next few orders after being so impressed that Mr. Gene Kelly got his own drink and spoke to me. Hell, he shook my hand and wished me luck.

Dr. Endicott, holding up two fingers cut in front of people. "Two gin and tonics with lemons and limes in each," he said smugly while his head swiveled to see who watched. I handed him his drinks and got no response as he awkwardly grabbed them from me.

Over the next couple of hours, the bowl reps took full advantage of the free drinks and Dr. Endicott continued collecting them two at a time. Guests clamored to fetch Mr. Kelly his next drink which he politely accepted. After some coaxing, he sat at the piano in the middle of the great room, playing requests and singing. Convincing others to join him he complimented each singer although the talent level varied greatly.

By midnight things slowed down and I found myself shifting my weight from side to side and wanting to go home. I noticed Dr. Endicott's wife holding a coke while he drank from both liquor glasses. Ms. Carson, just a bit tipsy, caught me staring and slowly navigated across the room. "I forgot to ask. How is your writing going?" she said as she handed me her glass. I

counted three olives and decided to stick one of the partial olives from the jar in her glass and fill it with water.

“It’s going well. I’ve just finished a manuscript,” I said as I handed her the watery drink and she looked into the glass then smiled at me.

“Why don’t you send it to me? Here’s my card.”

As the piano silenced we all heard it. Varoom! A roar ensued as Dr. Endicott entered the room pushing a bright red upright vacuum cleaner. Guests looked in amazement then snickered as his wife moved quickly to turn off the vacuum and lead him staggering down the hall. Mrs. Greer scowled as she returned the vacuum to the closet. I felt that I had just witnessed Dr. Endicott’s career streak across the sky like a shooting star.

Mr. Kelly played another song and when he finished he stood up. “One more song,” a guest pleaded as the others crowded around the piano.

“No I can’t, we have got to let the Greers go to bed or I’ll never be invited back.” People laughed and the crowd convinced him to do “Singing in the Rain” as an encore.

I made Mr. “Cotton Bowl” Buford his final drink placing three juicy olives in his glass before wrapping it with a napkin so he wouldn’t see them. I couldn’t imagine a more foul tasting concoction. “Bless your heart,” I said as I handed him his poison. He quickly looked up at me realizing I knew the nuance of the phrase. Across the room, I watched as he gulped his drink and spit the contents back into his glass spying the olives then shooting me a dirty look. I just smiled and mouthed you know what.

Holly Carson handed me her half-empty glass, “Thanks for remembering my nightcap and taking such good care of me. I’m looking forward to reading your work.”

Mr. Arturo leaned in and asked me in a slightly slurred tone, “Do you like oranges?”

Caught off guard and puzzled, I responded, “Yes.”

Removing his lapel pin, he stuck it on my shirt pocket and said, “Well you should be pretty happy in a few days.” Then he winked and walked away.

A constant gaggle of guests just inside the door said their goodbyes to the Greers as Margie raced to retrieve their hats and coats from the bedroom. The publicist assisted her by identifying Mr. Kelly’s distinctive Burberry coat. The guest of honor embraced President Greer, shook hands then gave Mrs. Greer a lingering hug whispering, “You have a lovely home and I’ve had a wonderful time. Thank you.” Then he strolled out the door followed by his publicist.

Suddenly, Margie came running, “Mr. Kelly’s hat,” and handed it to Mrs. Greer. As she stepped outside the publicist held up both hands and stopped her.

“Mr. Kelly’s fedora.”

“No Mrs. Greer, he wants you to have that. When Mr. Kelly enjoys himself at a party he leaves a keepsake for the host.”

With that thought and last line, I ripped the page out of my typewriter... THE ASSIGNMENT completed.