

Dystopian Lit

Trying to minimize a yawn, especially one that sneaks up with urgency and without warning, was a challenge. He looked around the room as if checking the alertness of the class and brought a fist up to shield his mouth from view, glad the student up front had her eyes down rather than looking out at the audience.

If pressed, Professor Strake would say he chose to sit in the back left corner of the classroom during student presentations because he didn't want to be the audience – he wanted students to present to their classmates while he took his copious notes for the grading he'd do during the weekend. But who was he kidding? The real reason to sit back there was to provide cover for his yawns and the occasional drooping of his eyes. As for the grading? He told them he waited until he'd seen all thirty of their presentations before assigning grades, that it was a comparative exercise. The truth was that he hastily wrote down an approximate grade range as soon as the presentation was done, and 98% of the time, that was the grade being entered on his Excel spreadsheet.

It wasn't laziness or sloth. Closer to emptiness – a feeling like there wasn't any more to accomplish. And it wasn't just professionally. He'd been divorced for almost twelve years now and middle-aged dating seemed inappropriate, almost gauche. There'd been no children (she saw his indifference to fatherhood as one of the many reasons to file), so his social existence mainly consisted of take-out dinners or leftovers in front of Netflix or Alex Trebek at his one-bedroom apartment.

The sun shining in from the side windows didn't help with drowsiness, for him or the students. They were almost there, the light at the end of the semester-long tunnel beginning to get brighter – only one more class meeting of presentations after this one. While he would never admit it to his students, it was just as tough for their professor to push through the last few weeks. Whether looking forward to the winter month off or, like now, the almost four months of summer, being so close to the end was more distraction than accomplishment.

Even the summer, a massive benefit of his profession, had become mundane. For the last five years, he promised he'd get to work on his novel, the one he'd been researching and outlining since the divorce. But if the past served as a guide, he'd get to mid-August with maybe ten pages of mediocre, over-edited prose, having spent the vast majority of his time at the laptop playing online gin rummy or going off on research tangents he justified as essential to creating authenticity in his work. He'd visit friends on the Cape for a long weekend and take a couple trips down to Pennsylvania to see his father in the nursing home, but for most of his summer break, his most creative production would be coming up with reasons not to sit in the chair in front of his computer like “the first two weeks after the semester were for decompression” or “it was always better to start fresh on a Monday” or “his ideas needed more time to percolate in his head.” Instead of looking forward to the upcoming break, he loathed the succession of humid days without real purpose or deadline along with the guilt he felt for wasting the time. And those days only led to the dull routine of classes resuming in September with the papers to grade, the two-hour faculty meetings, and the constant email stream in his inbox. An endless cycle of dread.

It had gotten to the point that, whenever he got an email from Human Resources, he hoped there'd be some mention of early retirement. Fifty-eight was a little young to qualify, but

stranger things had happened in these days of higher education belt-tightening and thrift. What would he do as a retiree? If he was given the chance, right this moment, to do over his professional life, would he take it? Maybe practice law or get into diplomacy? Wouldn't it have to be better than this? Wasn't he supposed to be at the peak of his profession by this point? Friends from college and high school were negotiating multi-million-dollar mergers and performing artery bypass surgery while he graded hastily written three-page essays written by nineteen-year-olds who thought reading the assigned texts meant skimming the SparkNotes. Strake returned his blank stare to the young woman up front, checking in to see if his poor first impression of her presentation had been a mistake.

“... and so the princess walked to the top of the hill and looked toward her favorite mountain. But she couldn't see it. The smog and clouds blocked her view, giving her a world that was smaller and fuzzier and reduced.”

She had decided to read a story for her presentation. Just read it. Without any visuals. About pollution. With her head down the entire time. Her voice a constant monotone. The prompt was clear and straightforward: taking into account what you've learned in the class, present an aspect of your personal dystopia in six minutes. It emphasized that thoughtfulness of the presentation was the most important aspect of the assignment, but come on. The class was expected to pay attention and remain engaged for this? When she'd come to talk to him about her ideas a few weeks ago, it seemed like she had more energy and enthusiasm for the project. And now here she was, just reading to them. She was one of those students who came by his office at least once a week.

Office hours. What had once been three hours to look forward to, a chance to interact with students in a less formal environment, had become the bleakest blocks of his academic

week. He remembered when students used to just come in and chat, sometimes offering a pretext from a class discussion to get in the door, but then talking to him about their lives, their challenges, their dreams. Now, they all just wanted him to edit their papers, telling them what needed fixing so they could receive their well-deserved A.

Had he changed that much from his first days on the job, a freshly-minted Ph.D. in his late twenties, excited about a career in front of the classroom? Strake used to give students the option of calling him by his first name, thinking it made him seem more relatable, like an older cousin instead of a parent. He'd go through his spiel on the first day of class - going over the class roster, handing out the syllabus, telling them about the required texts - and then just slide that piece of information in there, that they could call him "Pete" if they wanted to. Some took him up on the offer in the first fifteen years of his career, before the gray invasion above his ears and at his temple. But at some point, it became unseemly -- he wasn't sure if that judgment was more from his perspective or the perspective of his students. When asked, he still gave students the option, but the couple who took him up on it seemed more interested in the mischief of it, like children calling their parents by a first name, than the informality.

He knew how they viewed this class. "Dystopian Literature" might sound like an intriguing topic, but students took it because they had to - the college had a mandatory humanities requirement at the intermediate level. And they expected it to be a "gut" class - one where minimal effort would produce an A or, at worst, an A-. The fact that he pushed back against these grade expectations, keeping his average GPA for the class around the 3.2 range, was reflected both in his section being among the last of the intermediate electives to fill up and in the harsh comments he read when the semester was over in his student evaluation form summaries.

But if midlife dating was gauche, what was the midlife crisis? Wasn't it the ultimate in terms of being a two-dimensional character, a cliché? The privileged, sad, little white man who went on living his life, bored and disappointed with where his choices had led him, but unwilling (or unable?) to make any kind of substantive change? The ambivalence. The resigned passivity. Boo hoo for him.

When the woman presenting finished, she looked back to his corner expectantly, like a pet seeking verbal approval along with a scratch behind the ears. "Thank you, Amanda," Professor Strake said, beginning the applause that would half-heartedly spread through the room. "Nice job." He made a notation in the margin of his notebook, marking it as a "B-/C+," and then referred to the sheet of paper to his left for the presentation order before saying, "Next up is Warner."

A young man from the back stood and strode to the computer station in the front right corner, clacking at the keyboard like he'd used it for years. He was wearing one of those bulky flannel shirts that had come back in style, some kind of green and black plaid. It seemed all the skinny men wore extra-large clothes, providing a shapeless tent around their physiques, while the more muscular wore shirts and pants one size too small. Professor Strake wondered if Warner was one of those students who travelled northeast for college, never tiring of complaining about the cold and snow. "It'll take me a couple minutes to set up," Warner said.

Strake checked his watch, noting they were ahead of schedule. "Whenever you're ready."

The divorce. It probably should have felt like a bigger deal at the time, recognizing how much it was going to affect his patterns and change his existence. It had been a surprise, sure,

when she plopped the manilla envelope on the table in their breakfast nook. But looking back, it made sense: they'd become more roommates than partners, each with their own office space in the house, often eating breakfast and dinner at different times because of their schedules. Or because of their preferences.

At least, they'd kept the lawyers out of it, dividing up the assets with a few emails back and forth. He'd given in more than he'd stood firm, believing he didn't need much and hoping they'd retain some form of friendship. She kept the house, the new SUV, and half of their savings. Meanwhile, their interactions had been reduced to a Christmas card and a random email exchange once or twice a year when a news article or internet meme tweaked her memory of some instance from their shared past.

"Almost ready?" Strake asked the student at the front. Warner put up a finger, asking for another moment. It struck Strake as rude.

What did Professor Strake know about this presenter? Warner enjoyed participating and would come up with a truly insightful observation or point every once in a while. But for the most part, he was content to slouch in his chair during their discussions of *Brave New World* and *Never Let Me Go*, paying attention at a superficial level but never fully engaging. Strake wondered if it was the same when he'd been a student, that the bare minimum was acceptable instead of below average – as with most nostalgia, he wondered if his memories were tinged with what he wanted the past to be instead of what it actually was. Warner's performances on the analytical paper and mid-term showed promise, but he seemed to pull them off without really trying, like he'd rather coast to a B+ than work for the A. The young man looked up and gave a curt nod to Strake before turning his attention to the class.

“When you buy milk or eggs or orange juice, isn’t it nice to be able to check the label to see how long the product is good for? If you’re like me, you use the expiration date as a guideline instead of a mandate.” An image appeared on the screen behind him, a close-up of the printed expiration date on a gallon of milk. “But what if it was perfectly accurate? What if the company could provide you with the exact date the milk would go bad? Wouldn’t that be preferable? Wouldn’t that be more valuable information than what’s currently available?”

Already, Strake recognized the potential. He wasn’t sure where Warner was going, but the student had grabbed his interest. Young men and women who had been trying to sneak glances at their phones under their desks now sat up straighter and had their eyes focused on their classmate at the front. Maybe it would be as good as the woman who lived in a world without touch. Or maybe it would rival the world of the Bino.

The Bino presentation was that one glimmer of excellence, holding a mythic place in his memory. A video imagining a world where the race most discriminated against was the whites. And while the production values weren’t high (the student filmed using her iPhone) and the idea wasn’t, in itself, revolutionary, it was the little details and ramifications of the created world that set the presentation apart. The slur for whites was “Binos” and it was a term delivered with such bile and hatred that it was clear they lived at the bottom rung of society’s hierarchy. Their white skin was viewed as “soft,” unable to effectively deal with the sun’s rays, and the society viewed their paleness as an analogy for emptiness and simplicity. Some Binos tried to “pass” by tanning their skin while others projected “white pride” by keeping themselves covered and protected at all times, trying to preserve the creaminess of their skin tone. The presentation closed with a black character agonizing over the decision to have a child with her white husband, concerned

about the lightness of their future baby's skin and how much more difficult the child's life would be.

It had been given by one of his better students (but not one of the best) the third year he'd taught the course. For a couple semesters after that, he showed the presentation to other classes to give an idea of what an "A" presentation looked like. But then, no surprise, about one third of the subsequent presentations focused on different racial groups being discriminated against, poor imitations of the original. Some even concluded with interviews of citizens thinking about having interracial children. It confirmed one of Strake's theories about his students: they didn't think creatively and critically. They searched for the proven template to get the best grade without having to struggle or wrestle or fight. The pursuit was of a formula and a right answer. And, of course, it wasn't all their fault – it was the way their elementary and high schools had trained them to deal with intellectual challenges.

"Ever wondered what the future holds? Maybe not wanting to know exactly what's going to happen, but having some areas of certainty? Like knowing exactly when that milk is going to turn? If so, this is the app for you." A mock-up of a home page appeared on the screen up front, text written over a skull and crossbones. "I give you ... Expiration Date."

Warner pushed another button on the keyboard, animating a stick figure walking across the screen. It got almost to the center, bent over, collapsed, and died. But once prone, the figure lifted an arm and gave a thumbs up. If there was one area where students still occasionally impressed Strake, it was their comfort with the tech.

"Through our predictive algorithms and with the use of our quantum computing capabilities, our system can tell you the exact date ... yes, you guessed it ... of your death."

This is what Strake had in mind when he crafted the prompt for the presentation eight years earlier. Not the dozens of videos on global warming or the PowerPoints talking about overcrowding. This. Something creative. Something that showed the student had taken what they'd read about and watched and talked about all semester and synthesized it into a unique, harsh, frightening potential future. Even though Warner was barely a minute into his presentation, Strake wrote an "A" in his notes next to the student's name.

"Of course, it's comforting to believe in those concepts of free will and personal choice, but we've found that when enough predictive data is accumulated, Expiration Date is 99.996% accurate in predicting your DOD (or Date of Death). It's not about telling the future. It's about organizing trillions of pieces of data effectively."

As Warner continued, explaining the mechanics of his fictional app, Strake looked around the classroom. Almost all of the students' faces were engaged and attentive, a few mouths open, like when he checked their attention during a particularly jolting scene in a *Black Mirror* episode.

"It's true that, for some, the news will be less rosy. But we encourage you to examine that cup as if it were half full. If you only have fifteen months to live, wouldn't you rather know that fact? Wouldn't knowing your DOD change the way you live your life? Would you really spend those months working toward your degree knowing you'd die four months before graduation? Or would you drop out and travel more, spend time with your family and loved ones, make sure you filled those last days with as much of the positive as possible?"

Of course, there was no way an app like the one described could actually work. But Warner understood realism wasn't the purpose of the exercise. It was about extrapolating the

wants and desires of human beings to the nth degree and realizing a portion of the ugliness and selfishness and baseness.

“And for those who get good news ... those who learn they have fifty or sixty years left ... well, forget about skydiving or rock climbing,” Warner waved a hand to the side dismissively, batting away those inadequate suggestions. “That’s entry level thinking. Want to see if that sports car can actually hit one thirty on the Mass Pike? Give it a try! And while you’re at it, don’t worry about the discomfort of those pesky seat belts. Some one else might get hurt while you hurtle down the highway, but Expiration Date has already guaranteed your safety.” A few appreciative chuckles meandered through the classroom. “Hell, take it even further. Want to jump off the south rim of the Grand Canyon? Before Expiration Date, an idea like that might sound like certain death. But now, the app guarantees it won’t happen for years. So whether it means an inflatable cushion will miraculously catch you at the bottom or you’ll sustain serious, but not fatal injuries, you can rest assured the fall won’t kill you.”

It energized Strake, a jolt of adrenaline. The experience forced him to consider how long it had been since he’d felt it before. To have a student so effectively grab hold of the exercise, using the texts and conversations from the semester to create something unique and powerful and thought-provoking – maybe he had made the right choice professionally. Maybe he was making a difference. Maybe his classes weren’t just required intermediate liberal arts electives that students rolled their eyes over and expected to be gut classes. Or maybe this was the apex, the pinnacle. And it would be all downhill from here.

“In fact,” Warner continued, “I decided to give a live representation of what Expiration Date could do. I began inputting information for members of this class. And a funny thing happened. The more names I input, the more it continued.”

Warner clicked on the keyboard again and white numbers appeared in the middle of a black screen. It took Strake a moment to recognize the configuration of the date. There were several chuckles in the classroom, and a couple students turned to see their professor's reaction, wondering how they should respond.

“As you can see, when I put all of your names into the app, the same date came up. Today.” Warner began to slowly unbutton the flannel shirt, working from the bottom up. “At first, I wondered if there was a glitch. But then I realized, as usual, the system was 99.996% reliable. I just couldn't see how it made sense at first.”

The right hand went up. To Strake, it looked like one of the clickers the contestants held on his beloved Jeopardy, the instrument they used to buzz in. But then Warner pulled back one side of his unbuttoned shirt and stepped out from behind the computer podium. They looked like triple-sized sticks of butter, the wrapped blocks going around his midsection. The vest could be fake, Strake first thought. Or it could be real. It didn't take long for the uproar to begin.

Time slowed. A scream. Male. A commotion at the back of the room. Turning, Strake could see six or seven students straining at the door. Somehow, Warner must have locked or jammed it. Students were looking back toward Strake's corner, tears in their eyes, seeking guidance or protection. As if he had any control over the whole thing. A couple pairs stood up and hugged each other, eyes squinched shut. Others were flat on the ground or under their desks. There was a communal wail – Strake was sure it could be heard outside. And the smell – the body odor of primal terror, sour and pungent. The woman who had given the prior presentation was running around in circles by the side whiteboard, sobbing. I guess she's not so concerned about pollution now, Strake thought.

The front of the class had receded from Warner, students distancing themselves by slinking toward the back of the room. Strake continued to take it all in. He thought it was of interest. No one was confronting Warner or charging. He wondered how Professor Giroux over in Psychology would explain the phenomenon. If one attacked, would others follow? What was going through the group's communal hive mind? Was it self-preservation? Or some form of bystander effect? Granted, they likely wouldn't get there in time to stop him. But the gut reaction of the entire class was to retreat instead of attack. Fascinating.

Had Warner crossed a line? Would there be disciplinary action if it was all fake? Of course. But the presentation would still earn an A. If he ever got to enter the grade. What a waste it would be for this performance to not get the benefit of its judgment. But was the presentation about more than just a grade? Had Strake crossed a line, too? Did he have a preference as to whether or not the device was real?

A student two seats in front of Strake raised a desk and tried to throw it through the window. It produced a crack in the glass, but bounced back into the young man's chest, knocking him down onto his rear end, the surprise clearly evident in his expression. Warner remained standing at the front of the room, detonator (or whatever prop it was) still raised high in the air like a lighter at a rock concert. He looked Strake straight in the eye, the smile wide across his face. And he winked.

For the first time in years, maybe since the Bino, Strake was eager to see how the presentation would finally end. Either way.