

The Gilded Age

“Actually, it's pronounced Car-*neggi*. Emphasis on the middle syllable. If you were to go to New York City, to Carnegie Hall, that's how they'd pronounce it.”

Mr. Bobbit was in the middle of one of his micro-lectures, which Christopher had learned from previous students were delivered verbatim on an intractable weekly schedule each term without alteration or intellectual flights of fancy of any kind.

Christopher couldn't hold his head up any longer and wasn't even pretending to hide it from Mr. Bobbit.

“Wake up, Mr. McCorkle.”

Mr. Bobbit had wadded up a page of his notes and thrown it at a stoner kid named Lonnie “Duff” McCorkle, who was also sleeping. Duff roused slowly, his eyes still glued half-shut and a ribbon of drool hanging from the corner of his mouth. He had on a Pink Floyd “The Wall” t-shirt that was in heavy rotation in his weekly wardrobe.

“Aw, come on, Mr. Bobbit. Why does Chris get to sleep?”

“When you have Christopher's grades, you can sleep all you want, Mr. McCorkle.”

Mr. Bobbit liked to perch on the front of his desk when he lectured, his legs crossed at the ankles and his arms propping himself up stiffly. He kept his sleeves rolled up to show off his enormous, Popeye-like forearms, which were alarmingly hirsute. Mr. Bobbit spent the bulk of his extracurricular hours doing squats and dead lifts at the fitness center located in a strip mall on Main St. next to the old Blockbuster Video. His choice of exercise attire was invariably an old mustard-colored leotard from his Division III collegiate wrestling days that bulged obscenely in all the wrong places.

Christopher had also learned from a previous student that both the midterm and the final in Mr. Bobbit's AP History class were taken verbatim from the notes he posted at the beginning of each period, written neatly and meticulously on a transparency and placed on an overhead projector, which

the students were allotted 15 minutes to copy down, verbatim, prior to his lectures. It didn't exactly take a brain surgeon to ace his class. Duff's current average was 65.3.

Mr. Bobbit called everyone Mr. or Ms. so and so. He liked the decorum of it. He looked exactly like what you'd imagine an alarmingly hirsute middle-aged former Division III collegiate wrestler who spent the bulk of his after-school hours obsessively weight-lifting might look like.

It was two years earlier that a rather tawdry domestic violence case had gained national attention and quickly become one of the most iconic news items of the decade.

Late on the night of June 23, 1993, in Manassas, VA, a distraught young woman severed her abusive husband's penis with a kitchen knife while he slept, wrapped it in a paper towel, drove to a nearby field and tossed it out the window. She later called 911, and a team of search and rescue officials were dispatched to the scene to retrieve the erstwhile penis, which was eventually recovered and reattached during what doctors described as a grueling nine-and-a-half-hour procedure.

Almost overnight, "John Wayne Bobbitt" had become a household name, which caused no shortage of grief for Mr. Jon Bobbit, the AP high school history teacher.

Christopher was both hypoglycemic and borderline anorexic, and the Lithium salts they still prescribed in those days for bipolar disorder pretty much obliterated what little appetite he had left. Perpetually operating on both a physical and emotional deficit, he'd collapsed in one of his classes the previous term and had to be rushed to the emergency room. There were rumors that he was clinically dead for an undetermined period. Mr. Bobbit was aware of this, so he allowed Christopher to rest his head in class whenever he felt the need.

Mr. Bobbit was in the middle of his lecture on Andrew Carnegie, the U.S. steel tycoon who later in life became famous almost as much for his philanthropic and altruistic endeavors as for his status as one of the early 20th century's most influential titans of industry. A learned and erudite man, Carnegie was given to literature and philosophy and was an outspoken pacifist, although he was also at the center

of one of America's bloodiest labor wars, the Homestead Strike of 1892, during which Carnegie enlisted the services of the notorious Pinkerton agents in a deadly conflict that raged on for months.

Christopher was still awake but somehow dreaming. He saw himself – or his double, rather – standing in his mother's living room. He followed his double outside to an old RV parked in the driveway, the interior of which was some sort of alchemist or apothecary's lair. There were unlabeled jars of exotic-looking herbs and liquids lining the walls, which were adorned with ornamental sconces with half-melted candles glowing dimly. His double was standing at a richly-carved lectern with a large and ancient-looking leather-bound book opened to a page that revealed what looked like the illuminated manuscripts of Byzantium and early Christendom. His double studied the book carefully.

He could hear Mr. Bobbit's voice faintly somewhere outside the RV. Then the words bubbled up from nowhere: “She wore the world like a loose garment.” Out of the total dark he saw the figure of a woman rising over the jagged neon mountains behind his eyes, crossing over into something, some otherness, her long electric hair billowing around her like she was underwater, then standing naked on an ice floe in the blinding sun, drifting slowly out to sea, in the shadow of an unnamed glacial shelf. He could almost hear her singing, her voice rising among the steam and sunlight, a ukulele pressed against her naked skin in a sea of diamond light. Then blackness. His awareness doubling back, he felt an absence like a hole in the chest from a shotgun blast.

Mr. Bobbit couldn't hide the excitement in his voice when he talked about the mighty Andrew Carnegie, the Gilded Age's New American prince, whose family had, for generations, been handloom weavers until the Industrial Revolution rendered that enterprise obsolete, a man who had experienced actual poverty and saw poverty as an affliction and within himself the cure for that affliction. Mr. Bobbit was sometimes moved to tears by Carnegie's dogged perseverance in youth and his humanitarian beneficence in adulthood.

Christopher had followed his double into the sunlit corridor of an iron palace. There were rooms labeled on either side. Rare Bird Room. Room of Longhorn Skulls. Room of Taxidermy Bats.

Precariously Hanging Plant Room. Room of Decaying Floral Arrangements. Non-Functional Thermostat Room. Room of Afternoon Sun. Purple Octopus Room. Room of the White Leather Throne. Room of Vertically Stacked Books. Ceramic Knick-Knack Room. Room of Mysteriously Acquired Shells. Room of Wall-Mounted Swords. East-Facing Windows Room at Dusk. Room Dedicated to Rooms that are the Passageways Between Rooms. Menstruation Room. Room That When Empty Echoes with The Clicking Sound of High Heels. Hanging Origami Room. Room of Crossbones Juvenilia.

He saw faces. Sex faces. Random floating sex faces. He heard seagulls. Saw a random stony beach. He wondered whence all this subconscious conjuring. Felt a sudden urge to bear witness, give testimony, make a confession. He wondered whence his proper usage of the word “whence.”

Duff was pretending to take notes but was really drawing a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle pleasuring a busty biker chick in ripped fishnet stockings with a spiked collar around her neck who herself had a tattoo of a busty biker chick on her upper arm. It was too small to tell whether the tattoo was itself sporting the same self-referential tattoo, but it was the closest Duff had ever gotten to adding any sort of clever, ironic flourishes to his artwork.

Since 9th grade, Duff had subsidized his recreational drug use with a side business peddling obscene cartoon drawings to a select and discreet group of clientele. The Ninja Turtle piece was commissioned by a pimply tuba player Duff was egregiously overcharging despite being well past the agreed-upon deadline. He hadn't decided yet which Ninja Turtle it was going to be, the tuba player having never specified.

Still very much a virgin, Duff could only draw sexual acts from the memory of the images he'd seen in his father's pornographic magazines. The closest he'd ever got to having sex was the time Starla Jennings let him touch her boob while they were making out in the backseat of Ashley Cicerello's Subaru in the Grocery Outlet (aka “Gross Out”) parking lot.

Ashley Cicerello sat one row over and absently twirled a blonde highlight with a canary-yellow fingernail and chewed gum with her mouth open so that it made an irritating smacking sound and occasionally blew cartoonishly-oversize pink bubbles that burst with an equally-cartoonish POP once they reached critical mass. Ashley Cicerello's current average in Mr. Bobbit's AP History class: 77.5. Ashley Cicerello's virgin status: still very much a point of contention.

Duff was torn between Michelangelo, the Spicoli-esque surfer dude of the group, or the brooding and edgier Raphael. Either way, it would have a giant red anarchy symbol on the back of its shell. Starla Jennings was the only girl Duff had ever French-kissed. Before her, the closest he'd got was the time he had to administer mouth-to-mouth to a gender-neutral CPR dummy.

Ninja Turtle visual identification is based solely on the color of their eye masks and/or their weapon of choice, the latter of which was non-applicable in that case as Duff's sexual inexperience precluded him from exploring in his artwork what would potentially be some seriously kinky territory involving nun chucks and/or twin Okinawan sai blades.

Christopher re-emerged into the blinding light at the opposite end of the iron palace corridor. Austin Holloway, left tackle of the varsity football team, shot his hand into the air.

“No, Mr. Holloway, you may not have a bathroom pass.”

“That's not even what I was gonna ask, Mr. B. Gaaahhd!”

“My sincerest apologies, Mr. Holloway. Please proceed. Regale us with your intellectual inquisitiveness.”

“Why do we have to learn about some old dead guy from, like, the ancient times?”

An exasperated sigh from Mr. Bobbit.

“Ignorance is bliss, Mr. Holloway. But I'll hazard a response anyway, against my better judgment.”

Mr. Bobbit ventured from his perch for a rare classroom perambulation to better ruminate on the larger function of history, searching for a way to distill meaning among the rows of post-adolescent

heads. He removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. There was something about Carnegie's story that invoked in him a truly potent sense of civic pride and duty.

“Man by the name of Bill Gates. Responsible for those fancy computers over there in the library that connect to the World Wide Web. Richest man in America today. One of the richest men in the world, in fact.

“Mr. Carnegie was the Bill Gates of his day, the second wealthiest man in America next to John D. Rockefeller, who you'll recall from our previous unit. And like Mr. Gates, Carnegie was of the philosophy that his wealth came with enormous responsibility. A responsibility he did not take lightly.

“The Carnegie Corporation in New York. The Carnegie Institution in Washington D.C., which funds a great deal of scientific research. There's the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. An incredible facility. Has a museum of natural history. An impressive library. You've got Carnegie-Mellon, which donated \$15 million last year to urban libraries.

“Libraries, as a matter of fact, were the centerpiece of his legacy. He believed, as I believe, that libraries enrich lives, uplift the masses. He's responsible for more than 3,000 of them around the U.S. alone, the vast majority of which don't even bear his name. But they should.”

Mr. Bobbit paused at the window. He thought about his father's metal lunch pail that he carried back and forth to work with him to the steel mill each day for more than 30 years, how his mother would pack it with egg-salad sandwiches and granny smith apples, how it'd sit empty on the kitchen counter each night, its matte finish a black hole of stalwart womanly devotion. He imagined his father standing at the foot of an enormous tower of egg salad sandwiches stacked high into the clouds.

When Mr. Bobbit put his glasses back on and turned away from the window he was standing behind Duff's desk. Christopher had a fleeting x-ray vision of the Manhattan skyline, an island of vertical steel columns. Duff felt Mr. Bobbit's presence behind him and quickly closed his textbook on the drawing, part of which was still protruding.

Christopher was pretty sure he was going to throw up.

“What do we have here, Mr. McCorkle? Furiously scribbling lecture notes, I presume? Aren't we feeling particularly studious today.”

“No sir. I mean, uh, yes sir.”

“Mr. B.?” Christopher could barely get the words out.

Mr. Bobbit snatched the drawing from between the pages of the book.

“I can explain...I mean, it's not mine...” Duff scrambled for a way to deflect blame onto the tuba player. Ashley Cicerello was blowing a bubble the size of the Hindenburg that popped like a firecracker when she saw what Mr. Bobbit was holding.

“Mr. B.? I think I need a bathroom pass.” Christopher was no longer sure whether he was speaking out loud.

Austin Holloway started laughing obnoxiously when he looked over and saw the drawing.

“Mr. McCorkle, I have to hand it to you. It never ceases to amaze me all the truly innovative ways your generation finds to squander your God-given talent. Please see me after class, sir.”

“Mr. B.?”

Mr. Bobbit wadded up the drawing and tossed it in the trash bin next to his desk. Christopher heard a sound reverberating inside his skull like when he was hooked up to the nitrous tank at the dentist office, and his vision turned black and neon electric like when you stand up too fast. He collapsed onto the floor like someone flipped a switch that turned his body on and off.

Someone gasped. Mr. Bobbit rushed to his side.

“Lord, what happened?”

“He just...fell over.”

“Somebody...you...take the hall pass...go get someone in the office! Go! Now! Christopher, can you hear me?”

“Mr. Bobbit, you should probably check his pulse.”

Mr. Bobbit pressed his fingers against his neck. "I don't know...I can't really tell." He put his ear to his chest. "I don't think he's breathing. Does anyone know CPR?" He looked around the room.

"Anyone?"

Duff raised his hand sheepishly. Mr. Bobbit felt a sinking feeling in his chest.

"Well, don't just stand there, Duff. Get over here."

Duff slowly knelt beside Christopher.

"Now what?"

"I don't know...you already listened for his heartbeat, right? Maybe we should, like, check it again to be sure or something. I think I remember they said you had to be sure or you could, like, really injure him." He put his ear against Christopher's chest.

"Okay...I don't think I hear anything..."

"C'mon, Mr. McCorkle..."

"Alright, alright...let's see...you're supposed to tilt his head back...carefully, though. Now...clear his air passage, I think?"

"And how do we do that?"

"You gotta stick your fingers in his mouth."

Someone standing behind them said "ew."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Duff made a face and tentatively scooped out the inside of his mouth with his index and middle finger. "Okay, I can't remember, but I think you're supposed to do chest compressions before mouth-to-mouth?"

He used the palm of his hand to find what he hoped was Christopher's sternum, then put his other hand on top and interlocked his fingers.

"Okay, someone needs to count these. I'm supposed to do 30. Count out loud."

What flashed before Mr. Bobbit was a chronology of helplessness. Helpless the way he felt in Round 2 of the Division III semifinal of 1976 when a top-ranked senior from Oklahoma Central had

taken him down so quickly and viciously and with such flawless mechanical aptitude that before he knew it his opponent had his granite-solid thighs wrapped around his neck constricting his blood flow until he almost blacked out before the referee had to step in and stop the match. Helpless the way he felt as he watched his childhood home go up in flames from a grease fire and how his mother sobbed and wept and clutched her chest while someone sent word to his father at the steel mill. Helpless the way he felt as he watched his first wife pack her things while she waited for a cab to come and drive her toward a future that wasn't written in stone.

There he was, kneeling beside a dying boy, a sharp and attentive student like himself, his life in the hands of a total fuck-up whose only demonstrable talent so far was a (surprisingly impressive, he had to admit) ability to sketch cartoon drawings of animated characters fucking.

He thought about entire cities made of steel, the unimaginable weight of it all. He thought about all the libraries around the world. He imagined them all going up in flames. He looked down at these two boys and saw his life's work laid out before him. He thought about Atlas – that ultimate dead-lifter – holding up a world of steel girders. He thought that next time he'd have a better answer when someone asked why we study history.

