

Everything changed after my first paper cut. Somehow, all my youth, I had them figured as a figment. I'd gone decades amused by the antiquity of the letter-opener and imagined these quality lacerations as a sort of defeated peril from another age. Like smallpox, or being run down by a streetcar, or having a limb mangled by a washing machine. Not until I was struck did I believe in the small viciousness my forefathers had shouldered. The injury reached out of the past, invisibly, like a malaria festooned mosquito, delivered by post to the mailbox marked number six.

I had just returned to the atrium of my building from the heavy hours of my job. Book-stacking and customer service will no doubt be outlawed in coming generations, but in this age it was the only job I could seem to hold down. It was summer, in the outlays of Brooklyn, where all the buildings have tiny octagonal floor-tile that exist for dirt and heat. I opened my post box and quickly, nimbly, unthinkingly leafed through the glossy correspondence between the world's advertisers and Colin Beed or Current Resident. One of the most innocent; a plain, white, regular envelope stuck out from its slick cousins. My name with middle initial "S", "Colin S. Beed," was printed on the exterior. The return address lacked any business title, but the letter had originated in Delaware.

I knew at once I had plumbed deeper into debt. Trying to break into the high paid world of gonzo journalism, it seemed I had begun maxing out platinum Visas the moment I'd set foot in Manhattan. After a few years that will go down in my memoirs as "Chapter 2: Impoverished and Unsuccessful," and dozens of letters threatening legal action, I noticed the strange coincidence that all my anonymous creditors held offices in Delaware. I'd never actually been, but who would want to visit a city famous for

economic vampirism? And now, a small miscalculation had slipped something further through to those pirates.

“I will get to the bottom of this,” I thought with the rueful cock of an eyebrow. With young bravery I slipped my first finger into the fold. As I tugged, I felt the slightest surrender and heard the small creak of progress. For the coup de grace, my middle finger inched to assist. The seal gave way all at once, and the now freed flap of the envelope slid instantly between my nail and fingertip, separating the two with a hiss. During the slide over the last two inches, I realized I’d joined the brotherhood of the afflicted. An ejaculate of blood followed.

Of the most disastrous qualities of paper cuts, is the notion that it is a wound most certainly self-inflicted. No one threatens robbery with the crisp edge of the legal pad. I am positive there is no assault on record where the perpetrator held his prey at the point of Hammermill’s resume-quality, bone or ivory parchment. No, it’s only through extreme foolishness that one comes by this injury.

And as a deep crimson exhibit of evidence continued to leak onto the envelope, the floor, and my shirt, I felt the panic of self-incrimination. I cursed, squeezing my wounded finger. It looked like a tiny, bloody mouth on the end of my digit. A chorus of dogs, trapped behind the first floor doors, began yelping in fright and empathy.

This incident happened around the time I was playing catch-up with writers from the nineteenth century. I’d become convinced the reason I’d moved my Pulitzer caliber career only as far as unpaid intern for Rolling Stone and third key at Barnes & Noble was that I had no respect for the great masters of my trade. Really, since college, I’d been trying to woo them, this pantheon of writers, back from some twenty years of neglect. As

I was thinking of them, my bandaged finger throbbed the beat of its night hymn. I kept time in a hot bed, skimming through *A Tale Of Two Cities*, trying to levitate above the moist sheets. I thought of the authors I'd fought so long against and the strange man who had introduced me to them, and of course, about the letter from Delaware.

As a child, I hated most any bit of reading, and when forced, widened that dislike to all the authors of my discontent. I reserved a special, unequalled hate for Charles Dickens and spread it around to the rest of the windbags of his day. Even poor Edgar Allen, whose adventurous, stirring tales seemed every teacher's solution for a bright child without the love of letters, left me feeling each story might have been better written in a century where authors were not paid by the word.

Throughout my schooling, as much as I tried to keep on the other side of the literary street, whether it was with Kerouac or Marvel Comics, Charles and his crew of hacks kept on my heels. Succeeding as a student of journalism, at least at the institution I attended, meant having a working bibliography of these oceanic parable-kings. By my sophomore year, the severe unfamiliarity I had with the literary tradition's members of the board was becoming unbearable. Even in the heyday of postmodernism, quoting *On The Road* or *The Uncanny X-Men* just wasn't passing muster. I decided to dive into the heart of the matter, and registered for LIT269: Great Works: Literature of the Continent, instructed by the eldest faculty member, Julius Brandenburg.

I have to admit, this decision was not solely a matter of Nietzschean strength. As much as I liked the idea, I was primarily seduced into the class by Kristen Frank, my girlfriend at the time. By the best assessment, Kristen would have rather been anywhere than finishing up her History B.A. at twenty-six. Her entire life was full of arrested

development and she loathed it. Not to say that she didn't have a certain softness for me, but it was based in her perception of my provincial and youthful thoughts. I liked her because she was a feminist and showed it by marching in monthly rallies and relishing our sex life. I played a supporting role in both, sporting modern with my older, activist love interest. We were out to prove to the world that a self-proclaimed femi-Nazi could have a hetro-good time.

She said she enjoyed my "strange mannish qualities," though they were confined to my stick thin frame. She was a lapsed Catholic and judged life on a bipolar scale between obscenity and kink. Once she told me I was a pig for calling a picture of her beautiful. Once she told me a fantasy where she was rich and I was her brash pool boy, who she would take to New York and masquerade as a social desirable. Maybe we were just keeping time.

Kristen told me about professor Brandenburg as I drifted off to sleep in her apartment. She did this often; just launched right into it, conversation, as though we'd been talking through a related topic moments before. On this particular evening, I was jarred with babble about Brandenburg's rough and tumble upbringing in some Slavic province leveled during the Second World War.

Much to my disbelief, as my pulse regulated, the story did become more interesting. Brandenburg went on to Paris, where he worked as journalist and then joined the French Resistance. The more the story resembled a cinema plot, the more I was sucked in. He sported a luger and poison pills in case of capture. He made desperate escapes across Parisian graveyards. He carried out silent garrotes, housebreakings and

supply raids. And, according Kristen, he fucked like a minx across France and all the way to Berlin.

I registered the very next day. The assignment arrived through campus mail (without injury, mind you) shortly thereafter and I began suffering through *The Red And The Black*. And while I was sure Stendhal was in cahoots with Dickens to waste as much of my young life as he could, there were little moments, which were at the most extreme of Julien Sorel's suffering, where I did get involved. Where the tedium was abated, be it for just a stretch of his inescapable life.

At our first meeting, Julius Brandenburg spent all of a quarter hour on Steindhal, before the brief allusion of Paris sent him off on war stories that lasted the remainder of the class. At seventy-eight, he had retained most of his faculties, and repeated himself rarely in the same hour. He'd kept his height. I would have thought him still over six feet, had he managed to stretch from the slouch of ages. What kept him looking the youngest though, was his thick, white hair. It was a bit longer than early nineteen nineties style allowed for, kind of JFK, but with more of a wave to it. It might as well have been some mystic Egyptian talisman that preserved Julius' whiff of virility. Kristen described it as looking like an old satyr's haircut.

At the beginning of the second class, Julius didn't even bother with the reading and went right to an account of the first time he served dinner to the thanes of the SS in Orleans.

"On the very same night, I met the beautiful and bisexual, Chloe Albertis in the kitchen of the Château," Julius waxed to rapt audience. "As it turned out, as well as

being a gourmet cook, a deft seamstress, and a brilliant midwife, Miss Albertis was the Resistance's best assassin. You might say she was something of a modern woman. ”

The class laughed easily. Both the men and the women. Perhaps I'd been slow, but only then did I realize that Great Works: Literature of the Continent was a class for the scholastic tourist. I felt my studious intensions suddenly called into question. There was a choice to be made, a stand to take between pride and circumstance. I could drop with an air of personal prestige or enjoy the carnival for what it was. Much to my lasting benefit, I persevered against my solo voice of guilt and enjoyed the class to the hilt.

To my greater surprise, I also continued with the reading list beyond texts needed for the two papers. While Julius talked the spy game, Dostoevsky roped me in with *Crime and Punishment*. The professor reminisced over French women and I had Dumas' Lady D'winter keeping me warm. Noble Julius killed Nazis and I dissected Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The spring semester was drawing to a close and I could feel a truce with General Dickens coming on. A ceasefire. A willingness to climb out from the turret and go back to the maps.

Julius asked me to see him in office hours to discuss my final paper and I have to admit I was proud of the request. Thus far in my collegiate career I had been happy to slip by, occasionally commended by a stock phrase and forgotten. Now it seemed this old-timer, adventurer-poet was noting something extra in my character. At least that was what I hoped.

I mentioned my meeting to Kristen and she became excited. I wasn't sure if she was angry with me, or jealous, or just happy in a raw, rough sort of way. She said I'd best be ready. I'd best get my shit together. I'd best not be a disappointment or a child or

try to make a joke where there wasn't one. I said I thought I could handle it and she became indignant. She started packing. She was moving to the city in a month, and as an excruciating way of breaking up with me, she would pack at any complaint, tiff, or off-hand remark. I made to leave her room. Folding jeans, she called after me without regarding me with her eyes.

“Remember, Julius is an Intellectual. A real Intellectual.”

“And I am a what? A Provin-sexual? An Ineffectual?” I left slamming the door. It was a move from my father's repertoire. The quip and flee. Often with a little frightful punning on the quip.

Julius' office was small and homey. There were some old-style French advertisements for liquors on the walls. None original. They were imprinted at the bottom with a New York skyline, and stylized script: *Torre & Son Printing*. The centerpiece of the office was the oversized bottle of wine Julius was boring into with a corkscrew. A bulbous white cloth bandage overwhelmed the first finger of the bottleneck hand.

“You'll have some, yes?” he said, popping sweat and a forked blue vein beneath his executive-white cascade.

“Sure. I hope you didn't do that to yourself just now,” I said motioning to the bandage.

“No, no. I gave myself the most terrible paper cut.”

I snickered to myself and wondered what embarrassing activity he must be covering with a preposterous excuse like that. After pouring, Julius let me know my paper topic was the furthest from the evening's agenda by launching into a story about a

Californian brothel he'd visited in 1965. I spent the next thirty minutes laughing and nodding at the appropriate pauses, listening to his whoring stories rise up through Washington, meander across Canada, and finally settle back down the Hudson. After enjoying so many of these, I was familiar with his cadence and humor, and that familiarity set us both quickly at ease. He poured again.

“You know, Colin, I read your piece in this week's Sentinel. Honestly, I thought it was quite something.” Offhandedly, Julius had frozen my vain heart with his compliment. The Sentinel was openly regarded as one of the worst college papers in the history of student journalism. But I believed its reputation gave license to more adventurous sports writing than other papers might. My first column theorized that our losing soccer team might benefit from some of the coaching I'd seen at our Ultimate Frisbee meets, which included pre game drug use and co-ed showering.

“When you called Coach Farbough a ... what was it? ‘A fascist who needed grass more than most Chemotherapy patients.’ Well, I dare say your critique shows fine thinking and modern eloquence. Good show.”

I couldn't believe Julius Brandenburg was quoting my article. I also couldn't bring myself to tell him I'd been formally asked never to submit writing to the Sentinel again. But Julius steamrolled right through my silence with another gulp of wine.

“I think you're a student who has not lost his appetite for learning. Your class-work shows it. And I mean learning about life, not just keeping up with the reading. Do you know what that means?” Julius questioned wistfully.

This was not part of the class script. A little thrown by the subject change I just shook my head no.

“It means, at a certain point you will learn a thing or two *about* life. Like me. Like these authors,” Julius said, and passed the bandaged hand nonchalantly toward his books. “There’s a lot of modern criticism about these dead white men. I’ll probably be one soon enough myself. And I am perfectly happy about that. A little experience. A little trust in the fates and everything will just fall into place for you, right out of the blue, just like it does for me.”

With that advice given, I grew concerned that Julius had gotten quietly drunk during his storytelling and I would now be subject to a flood of fatherly lessons that had been hereto unrequited. Instead, in plain language and with an even tone, Julius asked if I’d mind if he slept with Kristen before she left for the year.

The brashness of the question caught me as though he had sapped me with the wine bottle. He sipped, letting me mull it around behind the blank face that was frozen on my head. Strangely enough, I hardly considered what I actually felt about the proposal, but simply wondered what Kristen would want me to say. As a feminist? As a woman? These questions swirled with a small twinge of elation that this out-to-pasture, hippie-by-day, James Bond by night had considered asking my permission. And right as that small joy was dawning, Julius compounded the matter, explaining that after he learned Kristen and I were dating for some months he thought it only right that he ask, one gentlemen to another. I downed my drink in a gulp and told him that while I couldn’t answer for her, I would pose the question to Kristen for him just as soon as I had the chance.

As a testament to Julius’ powers of ‘trusting in the fates’, not once did I question the subtle motives of professor Brandenburg. I left the office, zombie-stepped my way

back to Kristen's apartment and flatly asked if she would agree to sleeping with Julius Brandenburg. Not surprisingly, her temper went off like a cannon, hissing a few seconds at the fuse of disbelief and then exploding the room. Still suffering from Julius' mesmerism, I thought she was overreacting, and told her if she wouldn't think of it right then, she could at least consider doing it for me. After all Julius wasn't just a professor, he was a comrade. Outside of, "Fucking disgusting chauvinist perverted prick," Kristen and I never spoke again.

Beyond morality, the silver lining here is that I did end up getting an A on a half-assed final from Julius. He wrote along the back page, "A. Thank you from one Gentleman to another. Masterfully done." I meant to question him about the exact meaning behind the compliment, but before I could slip into his office hours the following year, I read in the welcome back edition of the Sentinel that Julius Brandenburg had died during orientation, helping twin students move into the woman's first year dorm.

I laughed to myself, alone, sprawled in the bed of my steaming hot apartment with my paper cut keeping time with the night. The contents of my vicious letter lay illuminated by the dim streetlight. Underneath the reddish brown smudges across the top was a check from the Delaware Office Of Harold Langley & Associates; Estate Executor for the late Willem S. Rieter, in the amount of \$293,450.75. He was my great uncle, and though I hardly knew him, I thought he was living up to the familial title remarkably well.

With a call home I learned Willem Rieter had been a recluse relative I had met at age seven during a shoestring family reunion. Apparently he had caught me in my Kodak

period, the July I had received a hand-me-down instant camera as a gift and spent three months chronographing in pictures the summer of 82. My mother remembered that Willem, who'd been a newspaper photographer during the depression, indulged me for a number of orchestrated photos. I must have struck a nerve with the old man, as without children of his own, or other close surviving relatives, his will exclaimed that I was the recipient of the entirety of his fortune.

Mom peppered the rest of the history with a number of little jabs about dear old Willem. He was considered by most Rieters to be an 'unbearable tightwad.' He'd had three wives, politely described as 'mousy,' whom he outlived through a culled, meticulous, and generally innocuous way of life. My mom, ever armed with understatement ended her evaluation with, "He really put off the rest of the family with his 'old-world' German beliefs." I found the summation unsettling, as its meaning could imply anything from a stick-in-the-mud chauvinist to a blitzkrieg tank commander. Still, when she asked how much Willem had left me, I lied flatly and uncharacteristically for me, and told her nine thousand dollars. She congratulated me and said that I could finally get a decent apartment.

Julius had been right; it was totally out of the blue. And Dickens and Stendhal, they were right too. With this mysterious benefactor, I was practically living in one of their novels. This life, my life, it was crazy if it were really governed by the prophecies of men like Julius Brandenburg, or the plots of the writer's pantheon. As much as I was ready to make peace with them, I wasn't ready to live in their storylines. I'd read and listened to their ramblings, maybe had a glass of wine with them, but I'd never agreed to any blood-pacts. My aversion really wasn't much of a resistance though. No matter how

strange this horse looked, I was not about to examine his teeth. The following day I would quit Barnes and Noble. I would point my bandaged finger at the manager, and tell her to kiss my pampered rich ass.