

Judge

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Richard Witched noticed the small envelope in his mailbox right away. It sat like a white raft on the sea of gray, brown, and beige detritus that gathered, as it did almost every day, in his slot.

He opened it immediately.

Dr. Witched:

Would you please be so kind as to stop by my office at 4:00 today.

I have something I'd like to discuss with you.

B. Oldstreet

Richard shook his head and grinned. *How like Dr. Oldstreet*, he thought. *He couldn't use the phone or just send me an email. He's got to write me a note.*

Bernard Oldstreet was the senior member of the English faculty at Hanford College, having marked his thirty-eighth year just last month. Despite the dramatic evolution of technology at the school, the venerable Stanford grad dealt with his days and his duties there very much as he did when he was finding his way as a new Assistant Professor during the early months of the Reagan administration.

There were those who saw it as resistance; others assigned it to his age. For Richard, it was just who Bernard Oldstreet was, among the many things that made him unique.

As he shuffled through the other items in his stack, Harriett LaSalle came up to the row of mailboxes, acknowledged him with a nod, and took her mail from its slot.

Richard had turned to leave when he heard Harriett LaSalle's resonant voice.

"What the hell does Oldstreet want?" she said to no one in particular. She slid the note back into its envelope. "So, now I've got to stick around another hour." She looked over at Richard, who had not taken another step. "Oldstreet," she shook her head. "Couldn't just send me a damn email."

Richard held up his own envelope and managed a grin.

"You too, eh?" she smirked. "I wonder what the old guy wants?"

He shrugged. "I guess we'll find out in a couple hours."

Richard Witched and Harriett LaSalle had been hired at the same time three years ago, primarily to teach comp with a smattering of survey literature courses tossed in. They had similar academic backgrounds and professional interests.

They both wrote, LaSalle more fiction than poetry. It was the reverse for Witched. They both very much wanted to teach creative writing courses at Hanford.

However, that small slice of the curricular pie at The College, for nearly twenty-five years now, was the province of one Bernard Oldstreet, a man whose own record of writing and publication impressed them. Just last year he completed his seventh volume of poetry and garnered his third Pulitzer nomination. He had earned Pushcart Prizes for both his poetry and his fiction. And though he was seventy-five, he was still a student favorite, adults and millennials alike.

There had been an occasion, though, when Witched and LaSalle had the opportunity to try their hands at the Holy Grail program. Last

fall, Professor Oldstreet had surgery, taking a medical leave for the term, and his three classes were assigned to other faculty members. Bruce Robbins took his American Novel class while Richard handled his Intro to Poetry Writing, and Harriett taught Intro to Fiction Writing.

In what was seen by some—and palpably felt by the aspirants—as an audition for the role of Oldstreet’s successor when that time came, the pair of ‘candidates’ did not speak of it to each other at all. If it was a contest, neither wanted to jinx the outcome by bringing their ardor into the common currency of conversation. Their efforts in those classes, though, were impressive, as were their results. Both achieved that rare pair of college teaching products: rigorous standards and high student evaluations.

For Richard Witched it was the highlight of these first years in his career; there wasn’t even a close second.

There was, however, another gold ring in the cycle of Richard and Harriett’s routine at Hanford, and it, too, involved Professor Oldstreet: judging the annual high school writing competition.

In 1990, Oldstreet established writing awards for high school students in the region served by Hanford College. It began modestly, as such things do, but, with the force of the Professor’s will and talent behind it, the event began to grow rapidly. In that first year, fewer than a hundred entries were submitted in the categories of poetry and short story. Last year, that number approached fifteen hundred.

As the competition gained in scope, its stature grew as well. The annual Awards Event on campus in May (of course, hosted by Oldstreet) had become one of the spring term highlights at Hanford, expanding the already substantial halo around the figure of its originator, patron, and, for all its years, its only judge.

And while he never complained about the task of reviewing all those stories and poems, it had become plain of late that it was now quite a burden.

Rodney Elsko, English Department Chair, encouraged by both LaSalle and Witched, had asked Oldstreet to seek help with the judging, but he had steadfastly resisted.

"This is my contest, Rodney," he had told the Chair last year. "I can get this done. I always have." And so the Chair relented.

Word in the Department, though, was that four new schools had submitted entries, and this year's harvest was a barn-buster.

Sitting in his small office in the 'Assistant Professors' Corner' of the Department's digs, Richard Witched flipped through the day's stack of ads from booksellers, conference brochures, notices from the President and the dean, updated class lists and enrollment information, and late assignments/notes from students, the perfect storm of 'white noise' reading to conjure the subjects living near the surface of his thought.

What if Oldstreet's retiring? was the first to emerge, as usual. *What if he's going to tell us about his courses?* the usual follow-up and cause of immediate tightening in his stomach. That would mean the moment of truth, the decision he'd waited for and dreaded since he first understood the lay of the curricular land in the department. *What if it's LaSalle?* came next, as usual. *She's smart as hell, a good teacher, and a good writer, probably better than me* was the final ingredient in this oft-repeated recipe. *What do I do then?* closed out the sequence with its bitter taste.

That simple white envelope now sitting on his desk could be the ticket to one of two very different destinations.

As it happened, Richard Witched and Harriett LaSalle arrived at the same time at the door of Bernard Oldstreet's spacious corner office (with a large window overlooking the Hanford campus quad), appearing like defendants about to hear a verdict. LaSalle's own thoughts on the matter produced a product very similar to Witched's, so their expressions were pressed from the same, anxious mint.

Oldstreet was seated behind the large desk at the center-back of the office, his tall window behind him. The whole place was disheveled yet orderly in just the right proportions to convey exactly the essence of 'esteemed professional presence.' Richard remembered thinking once that it appeared as if a design team had gone into the office and arranged the hundreds of books on the shelves and papers across the desk in precisely the manner required to achieve the effect, even down to the slightly open and askew tie and the touch of jostled hair on the venerable head. Oldstreet looked up as they entered.

"Oh, hello. Is it four o'clock already?" Both Witched and LaSalle were certain that he indeed did not know. The Professor extended his right arm. "Please sit." And as the two junior faculty members took their seats, Bernard Oldstreet reached down for two boxes of what appeared to be copy paper. 'LaSalle' was written on the top of one; 'Witched' on the other. Now standing, he yielded a slight grunt as he set each in turn onto his desk.

This isn't about retirement, the two assistant professors thought.

"You may have heard that the response to this year's writing competition has carried well beyond last year's. It's actually quite remarkable really." He sat back down. "And I also think you two know that Dr. Elsko has been after me to get help with all this business."

There was an odd feeling in the room, a peculiar blend of guilt and hope. It came off the two visitors like the scent of school children coming back in from recess on the playground in the fall.

“Well, I’ve not wanted to give up any of this, but these numbers have made my decision for me. There are seventeen hundred pieces submitted to this year’s contest, fourteen hundred poems and three hundred stories.”

Richard and Harriett looked at each other like dogs that had finally caught the car they’d been chasing for a long time.

“And I’ve decided to ask the two of you to help me this year.” He paused. “Would that be something you’d like to consider?”

“Oh, yes, Dr. Oldstreet,” they sang out together as if it had been rehearsed.

The old man smirked. “Well, good. I thought you just might. I’ve divided the pieces in half: seven hundred poems and a hundred fifty stories in each box.”

The scope of those totals filled the office as Oldstreet patted the two containers. “I’d like you two to serve as the preliminary judges.”

They nodded, more soberly than they might have ten minutes earlier.

“What I need is for each of you to choose what you think are the thirty best poems and the fifteen best stories in your half. I’ll do the final judging from among the pieces that you send forward to me. Does that seem reasonable to you?”

Nods again. Then Harriett half raised her right hand as if a student in class.

“When do you need these done?”

If Bernard Oldstreet still had a bashful look left in his repertoire, it showed itself at that moment.

“Well, Dr. LaSalle, I really need to get started choosing the winners in about three weeks.”

“Three weeks,” LaSalle repeated as if she hadn’t heard clearly.

“Yes. Three weeks. Will that be a problem for you?” He looked at them both.

“Oh no, not at all,” Richard Witched said before LaSalle could draw a breath.

“Because I really need this done by then. I hope that isn’t a problem.”

“No, Dr. Oldstreet. That won’t be a problem,” Witched said as if convincing himself. “You won’t be delayed.”

“Good, good. I’m a bit leery of doing this as it is. I’m not accustomed to depending on anyone in this contest. For more than twenty-five years.” His voice trailed off and he raised his eyes to somewhere above their heads. “This whole business has been mine, and....”

“Don’t worry, Dr. Oldstreet,” Richard Witched heard himself say. “We’ll get this done and back to you in three weeks.”

The Professor didn’t seem fully convinced, but he appreciated the effort and was nodding his head slowly as the two left.

“What the hell, Witched?” Harriett LaSalle’s voice rose as the two walked away from Oldstreet’s office. “Could you have been more obsequious in there?”

Richard stopped. “Oh, I suppose you were going to turn Oldstreet down?”

"I didn't say that, but 'Yes sir, we can do this in three weeks?'"

"It's when he needs it. That schedule's not up to us. What should I have said? 'We'll have it for you when we have it for you?'"

"The old man's senile, Witched, and now we get to play along," LaSalle huffed. "Lucky us."

"He's hardly senile, Harriett. He's a legitimate scholar and teacher..."

"Oh yeah, the 'great man,' I forgot. And he'll probably be teaching here another ten years. You can put his picture on your wall, Richard. I don't need an icon to look up to."

Harriett LaSalle continued on down the hall as Richard watched her go.

Three days later, Richard Witched sat at the kitchen table in his apartment two miles from the Hanford College campus. Beside him was a small stack of papers, the first thirty of the poems. He had set two aside as possible candidates, including one that had jumped off the page at him. The others garnered just a 'maybe' in the upper right corner where the name had been removed, replaced by a coded number. Dr. Oldstreet had the actual names of the entrants.

Richard wasn't quite sure yet just what he was looking for, but what he had found was a fairly common and, he supposed, predictable feeling of teen angst, a bit like reading re-arranged diary excerpts. When passages of what seemed like real poetry appeared, they clearly announced themselves.

When he had gone through fifty pieces, with four now set apart from the others, he decided to change the pace a bit and started in on the stories. Twelve entries in and he began to conclude that, apart from

the obvious differences in form and structure, the narratives seemed to be fruit of the same emotional tree.

Story thirteen, however, was different. It was called “Not My Home.”

Like some of the others, it spoke of problems at home, tensions among family members, parents and children, a desire for change, the need to get away. But story thirteen seemed much more ‘real’ on those subjects, more visceral. The father in the narrative drank too much, and the rest of the family bore the weight of that behavior, especially the mother. There were suggestions of abuse, but no such scenes, though the details of other aspects of the tale were very precise. In the third-person, but that seemed a shield for what wanted to be first.

Richard set it aside after he read it, not because he saw it as a potential finalist, but because it moved him in a way unlike any he had read before; it put him off balance.

He read it again and set it in its own stack of one.

On Monday morning, returning from his 8:00 composition class, Richard Witched stopped at Harriett LaSalle’s office. She was reading from her contest entries.

“You got a minute?”

She looked up, shook her head. “Barely.” She set the story aside.

“It is a lot of reading isn’t it?”

“I told you it would be, Richard. What’s up?” She pointed to the single chair positioned before her desk.

“Well,” he began, sitting down. “It’s about this one story I’ve read. It’s so *disturbing*. I don’t know what else to call it.”

Harriett shook her head. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

“Well, no, I haven’t, but...”

"Listen Richard, I've done this a couple times already, back when I was finishing at Virginia. I helped judge a couple high school contests." A wry smile came over her. "It does take some getting used to, all this 'poor me,' 'life sucks,' 'I'm doomed,' 'nobody loves me,' 'my boyfriend's an asshole,' 'my girlfriend's a slut,' 'when will my caterpillar turn into a butterfly,' 'let's all just love one another,' 'my parents have been emotionally sucked dry by life,' 'why doesn't she love me,' 'my team is the best,' 'adults have ruined the world,' 'butterflies-unicorns-rainbows-dungeons-vampires-princes/princesses-dark empty rooms,' and 'midnight'."

Richard could feel his head nodding as she spoke.

"Yes," he said, louder than he intended. "Yes, that's it."

Harriett grinned. "How quickly we forget. Before our marriages to Faulkner, Hemingway, Dickinson, and Stafford, we were writing some of the same crap. Do you still have any of your high school stuff?"

Richard smiled. "Somewhere in some dusty box."

"Have you read it in the last five years?"

"Of course not, no."

"Go find it and sit down with a bottle of something you like and give it a read."

He smirked. "You know, I just might do that."

"You'll get a kick out of it."

"But Harriett, this story. It's some of those things for sure, but it's different.

It's not just dark, it's..." He leaned forward. "Did you ever read something that made you *worry*, that made you feel like you should tell someone about it?"

Harriett's tone changed. "Richard, don't get caught in that. It's a story, and sure I've read pieces like that. Some of these kids like to shake up whoever's going to read it. Some are pretty good at it, too."

"I don't know."

"Don't worry about it. Is it a finalist? Are you going to pass it on?"

"No, no. It's not that it's all that well-written."

"Then flip it over, back into the pile."

"But what if...?"

"What are you going to do? Are you going to take it to Oldstreet?"

LaSalle's voice rose.

Richard drew a deep breath. "Well, I was thinking about it."

"Oh hell, *Witched*. That's the *last* thing the old man wants to see. You think he's going to follow up on something like that, and this, the first time you've been a judge? He's been doing this since forever, and I bet he hasn't circled back on a piece because it made him nervous, *ever*. Not one time!"

Richard *Witched* hadn't thought about that at all. He felt himself slide back in the chair.

"Richard, if you know what's good for you, just take the story, flip it back into the pile and move on."

"Sure, sure," he nodded, stood, and turned for the door.

"Just turn it over and move on with your reading, okay?"

"Yeah, thanks Harriett." He headed out into the hall.

That night, Richard *Witched* returned to his contest stack right after dinner. By nine o'clock he had made it through just about half the entries. He had nineteen poems and eight stories set aside. And he had one story sitting off on its own beside the other stacks.

Harriett LaSalle had been right. So many of the poems and stories were mainly flights of teen angst. There was an almost predictable regularity to them, like chewing gum that had lost its flavor. But there were those that introduced a spark of taste, and they jumped out and declared themselves. As a result, he found the whole process, while mostly tedious, still engaging enough to keep him moving forward, like panning for gold in a stream where he knew nuggets did exist.

And then there was "Not My Home." He had read it again twice. And while he understood and appreciated what Harriett LaSalle had said, and so much of it sounded right, he still couldn't regain his balance after reading that story.

It was like the others, yes, but its darkness did not seem to be the Gothic painting of the writer but the real skies above that young person's world. It all felt so real.

But so was Harriett LaSalle's experience and Bernard Oldstreet's years of working on the contest. His colleague's words repeated in his head: "Richard, if you know what's good for you, you'll just take the story, flip it back into the pile, and move on."

He looked up at the paintings on the wall above the bookshelf, drew a deep breath, and moved "Not My Home" back into the stack of pieces that would not be read again.

As it turned out, Witched and LaSalle finished their first round judging three days before the deadline. Professor Oldstreet was delighted to receive their recommendations, thanking them both for their hard work and professionalism. "It will be noted," he assured them.

They congratulated one another as they walked back to their offices, and Richard began to feel for the first time the whole experience spliced into the unspooling reel of his past.

That night, just after he finished grading a class of Comp II essays, Richard opened a beer, turned on the television, and stretched out on the couch. Tomorrow was Friday, a light day at school, and the weekend weather looking like he just might be able to get out and around a little bit.

After a commercial for a local bank, the nightly news came on with a 'Breaking Story' banner across the bottom of the screen. The reporter stared seriously into the camera.

"A fifteen-year-old boy from Bayville has been taken into custody..."

All at once a picture of a split-level house with yellow police tape stretched around the front appeared on the screen.

"...after he allegedly shot and killed his father."

The house was replaced on the screen by the picture of a fortyish-looking man who could have been anyone Richard might have seen at the mall, the library, just shopping at Kroger's.

"Forty-two year-old Robert Jennings was found dead in his home early this evening after neighbors called police when they heard what they thought were gunshots in the house on Liberty Street. The neighbors said they had heard people arguing there earlier in the day."

Two people appeared on the screen: a reporter holding a microphone and a man, apparently one of the neighbors, beside her. He seemed distraught.

"Tell us what you heard," the young woman asked.

The man shook his head. "Well, there were these loud voices coming from the house and, well, we had all heard that before, but this time, this time they were louder, angrier than ever."

“There’s been trouble here before?” She looked at Evans, then out to the camera.

“Well, let’s just say this wasn’t the first time.”

“But never so bad that the neighbors called the police?”

The man’s expression changed. “I...” He shook his head slowly. “I’d rather not say.” He began to back away from the microphone. “Okay? I’d just rather not say.” He disappeared as the shot focused now on the young reporter.

“There you have it, Jim. A man is shot dead here in his Bayville home, and his fifteen-year-old son is now in police custody. It is believed that alcohol may have played a role in this incident. We’ll keep you posted with updates as information becomes available.”

Richard felt himself slip back on the couch. His mouth hung open and he slowly wiped his left hand across his face.

The news shifted to a story about a proposed tax increase in town, but Richard could not hear the words.

He still saw the tortured face of the neighbor. He heard his shaky voice.

Could it? Was this? Richard’s eyes rose to the paintings above the bookshelf. *What if?* He knew in that moment he would not sleep. □