

GRAY SQUISHY STUFF

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Professor David Farmer finished his lunch—egg salad on wheat toast — at 1:30 pm. He had already interviewed three candidates for the one research assistant position he'd been allotted by the Psychology Department: a feminist, a descendant of Freud, and a Neo-Rashti with dreadlocks. At two o'clock, he had an interview with the fourth and last applicant, Natalie Ward, a psych major minoring in statistics. Hopefully, she'd be bright, pretty, over eighteen, and in need of a mentor.

"I study the mind," he explained. "Psychology is all about Functional MRI and pharmacology now, but I believe the mind is independent of the gray squishy stuff. What do you think?"

"I think it's a good thing you have tenure, Dr. Farmer"

Did she know he hadn't had an article published in three years and his colleagues ignored him? Her blue eyes delivered a steady gaze. The other candidates gushed faux-fascination with his intellectual pursuit, how the mind played tricks on people, and how the mind disappeared with age. Natalie didn't even pretend he was brilliant.

"What area of psychology are you interested in?" Maybe she was just a do-gooder hiding behind a façade of objective professionalism. PTSD? Intersectionality? He guessed Addiction.

"Genius," she said.

"What about it?" Did she mean him? She might be one of those women who had been a prison guard in a former life.

"I'm interested in where creativity and innovation comes from? Why do particular socio-political environments destroy it? Prometheus gave humanity fire, but did he didn't teach us how to barbecue. How did football, Sunday afternoons and gooey-sauced food come together?"

He never thought genius and the NFL as congruent, but maybe they were. "Where do you think creativity comes from, Ms. Ward? Nature or nurture, or a little of both?" He didn't want to patronize, but her area of investigation was fraught with ontological perils. He hoped she didn't desire an academic career. Genius, after all, was an elitist club classification that

recognized gross inequality among people, and was therefore un-PC. *Mala in se*. Bad in itself.

“None of the above, Dr. Farmer. Beethoven, Mozart, and John Phillip Souza heard complete musical works in their entirety in their heads. Mary Shelly wrote Frankenstein in one night. They didn’t spend hours or years agonizing over every note and word of their creations. I want to find out if, how and why. Can genius be taught?”

“How’s that research going?” English Professor Louise Huller, and her three-year quest of the perfect first line of the great American Novel, entered Farmer’s thoughts. Why do all English teachers need to talk in metaphors and simile before making *la’mour*?

“I’m in the ‘formulating procedures’ stage,” Natalie said.

He perused her application. A sterling senior thesis. Part-time editor for the Chronic-colonic of Higher Ed—a publication with editorial problems of its own. Pretty, bright, over eighteen, and potentially useful. “Can you work week-ends?”

“Sure, with enough notice so I can get my mom to babysit my Benjamin. He’s three.”

“And a genius, no doubt.” Not even a smile. “All mothers believe their children are special in some way.” Still no reaction. “Don’t you think so, Ms. Ward?”

“Only psychologically confused parents imbue their offspring with talents they don’t possess. Yet ... some children do exhibit exceptional attributes.”

Was she kidding? “Which is it with your little Benny?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Natalie said. “I got a note from the campus pre-school teacher like the one sent to Tom Edison’s mother by his teacher who told Ms. Edison her son was stupid. Well, Tom was smart enough to hold a thousand-eighty-six patents from light bulbs to the telephone, and my Ben was smart enough to get away from that nursery school bitch, right?”

“How sad.” And peculiar that a pre-school teacher would be so blunt in today’s legal exposure landscape. “I have a few more people to interview, but I’ll be in touch,” Farmer promised.

That afternoon, he hunted down the Early Childhood Development Center, and entered the belly of runny-nosed beasts. Maybe Ms. Morgan was still around, gnawing on a toddler taco. “I’m looking for Ms. Morgan,” he asked a wild-eyed, red-haired forty-something woman who forced a smile.

“Yes. That’s me.”

“I’m here about Natalie Ward”

“Are you from administration?” she demanded.

“No. Did Ms. Ward file a complaint?” A “yes” would be an employment deal-breaker.

“Not yet. We need to talk.” Ms. Morgan left five toddlers in the care of her graduate student aide and led him to a glass enclosed office. “Sit down, please”

“I’m Dr. David Farmer. Psych Department. I interviewed Ms. Ward today, and she mentioned a letter.”

“It was a form letter we use to dissuade parents from beginning early childhood education too early. I suspect he’s on the spectrum, as we like to say.”

“That sounds like a euphemism for ‘your kid is a brat and I don’t like him,’” Farmer said hesitantly.

“The Ward child can’t tie his shoes, sucks his thumb, barely speaks but pretends to read. When I tried taking a book from him —he threw a tantrum. All he does is draw and pretend to read.”

“Are you sure he’s pretending?”

Her face contorted. “I asked him to read to me and he couldn’t do it.”

“Or wouldn’t,” Farmer mumbled before saying, “Kids are stubborn with people they dislike. Give me the book and I’ll schedule a meeting with Ms. Ward. Perhaps I can convey the message with less directness.”

“Meaning, you’d rather use psychological euphemisms like developmentally challenged?”

He didn’t appreciate others peoples’ challenges, developmental or otherwise. “We don’t want a ... situation over sensitivity.”

“Alright.” She opened her desk drawer, pulled out *Translating Caesar’s Gallic Wars*, and handed it to him. “Good luck, Dr. Farmer.”

The next day at 11:00 a.m., Dr. Farmer, Natalie and Ben were stuffed inside an office in the Language Arts building that smelled like a basement. “I didn’t know we still had a Latin Department, Dr. Copleman,” Farmer began. “Thanks for seeing us.”

“Got your e-mail and thought you’d gone off the deep end, Farmer. All that business with Dr. Huller and inappropriate touching last semester...” Copleman said. “But, this situation’s easily resolved.” Three-year-old Benjamin sat on the floor, drawing on a legal pad. “*Quod nomen tibi est?* What is your name?” Copleman asked.

“Ben!” the child shouted.

“*Hic est liber tuus?* Is this your book” Copleman said as he held up the text-book.

Ben looked up. “*Ubi inveniet eam?*”

“Where did you find it? ... The child asked where I found it. This is astounding!” Copleman turned to Natalie. “How do you communicate with him?”

“Not easily,” she said. “His German is much better than his Latin.”

Farmer had concluded the child was an idiot savant ... until Ben tore off the page of his drawing pad and handed the professor a perfect likeness of himself. “Who are you really, child?” Farmer asked as he gazed into the child’s face.

“*Ego genius, sed nemo audiat aut itelligere,*” the child said.

“I am Genius, but no one listens or understands,” Copleman translated. “What should we do, Farmer?”

“Write a grant proposal. He’s a gold mine,” Farmer whispered.

Yes, Ben was what the Psychology Department needed: a research subject in search of a theory. What had Natalie done while pregnant? Who was the father? Was Benjamin an Immaculate Deception? Why was he, the tenured Dr. Farmer who had peaked salary-wise, a nothing while Natalie, a single mother dependent on student loans, got a three-million-dollar grant to study her own child?

Every night for the next four years, Dr. Farmer would lay awake, asking a myriad of same- perplex questions and listening to inner voices shouting,

“It’s unfair! Find a flaw! Nothing perfect exists in an imperfect world. Treachery and class divisions can defeat genius. All it would take is an accidental injury, Benjamin’s precocious little head under the wheels of a trash truck, perhaps, anything that would destroy his grey squishy stuff. Unless ... genius didn’t require gray squishy stuff. What if Ward’s research established support for the opening line of her Master’s thesis: The reality of a given phenomenon is often ineffable.... “And insufferable,” Farmer muttered to himself each time he read the introduction.

Was it reincarnation? Regular consumption of V-8 Juice? Or was Benjamin Ward’s inexplicable facility for language and art proof of supernatural intervention? If so, might God exist? The possibility of that reality confounded Farmer, so he cursed the darkness, reconsidered his career choice, and performed a cost/benefit analysis of murder. It was either that, or suicide.

It was inevitable that he and Benjamin would square off in a sort of a duel at high noon. “Can you watch Ben until I speak to the Dean?” Natalie had asked. “Twenty minutes, tops.”

“Certainly, my dear. It will give me and Ben a chance to get to know one another.”

She tousled Ben’s hair, and he blew her a kiss as she turned to wave at the door. The demonstration of a mother’s love is such a heartwarming thing to witness. Yet, when the boy trained his eyes on Farmer, they narrowed and a slim grin followed. The professor joined the boy on the thick recently installed grat-financed carpet, where the boy played cops and robbers with Hot Wheel cars. It was going to be a challenge to wring information from him.

“Does your daddy like to play cars?” Farmer ventured.

“He’s gone,” Ben said.

“Gone where?”

Ben pointed to the ceiling. “Up there.”

“To the stars? Heaven? Canada?”

“Me, too, if you have your way. But you won’t.”

His worst fear had been confirmed. Ben could read minds as well as master languages. He shivered involuntarily. He was a dangerous individual, alright. Farmer stood and went to his desk. It was kill or be killed.

“*Alea iacta est,*” Ben said.

The die is cast. The boy was clever. Die – craps? Coloring material? Or, a warning he could be murdered? He could see Natalie crossing the quad towards the Psychology Department building. As far as he was able, he imagined himself in love. Perhaps, because he had a rival equal to his intelligence, he now wanted her more than any other woman he'd lusted after, and he could never attain her. Benjamin would never allow it. And, for the first time in his life, he was happy.

"Melius est semper velle quam possidere," Ben said. Wanting is always better than possessing.

Every genius knows that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenean McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, who taught Political Science and Sociology, mostly on military bases, for over twenty years. Her fiction, poetry, and photographs have been published in over two-hundred-sixty-five print and on-line journals. Her how-to book, *Writing Beyond the Self; How to Write Creative Non-fiction that Gets Published* was published by Vine Leaves Press in 2018. She won the Eastern Kentucky English Department Award for Graduate Creative Non-fiction in 2011, and a Silver Pen Award in 2015 for her noir short story: *Red is Not Your Color*.