

PERHAPS, NOT

GREGG SAPP

Professor Ona Sonta had three sets of business cards; she kept them in separate stacks, side by side, on a shelf behind her desk. On cards in the first stack, beneath her name, degree credentials and institutional affiliation, her professional title was listed as “director.” The other cards were identical save for the title—those in the second stack identified her as a “professor of library science,” and on the third, she claimed the designation of “suicidologist.”

She removed a card from the first stack, which was the shortest, handed it to Echo Adams, and said, “I do understand, of course, that this decision is distressful for you. But however, you have my assurances, coming from all my heart, that I will manage your kind donation with the very utmost respect.”

Echo examined the card. Apart from its printed information, it was plain, eggshell white. It looked like it might be homemade. Its simplicity contrasted with the engraved bronze plaque on her office door that read, Director of The Ohio State University’s International Depository for Terminal Correspondence. Didn’t a person with such a distinctive title deserve a business card with some kind of official logo or seal on it? This did not reassure her that this place was legitimate.

Émile also held out his hand to request a card. Echo noticed that Ona Sonta took it from the third stack.

“I offer to you my sincerest condolences,” she said. Ona Sonta had a slight Eastern European accent, a subtle lingering on vowels and misplaced stress on hard syllables, with a gravitas that seemed appropriate for her vocation.

“I, well, wasn’t sure. It’s hard. I’m still processing...” And that was as far as Echo could get before erupting into tears.

Seated next to her, Émile put a hand on her knee and whispered, “Be strong, *chérie*.”

Ona Sonta handed her a box of tissues. “You are having normal feelings,” she assured her, “although knowing so does not make it any more easy to cope.”

Echo dabbed her eyes. “I can’t keep it. I know that for sure. But it wouldn’t be right just to throw it away, would it?”

“Personally, I do not believe that there is any way more right or wrong to deal with these feelings. Professionally, on another hand, my promise to you is that your donation would be honored as a valuable addition to my collection.”

Echo said, “thank you,” but she wasn’t sure for what—the professor’s moral support, or her assessment of the potential donation.

Émile exhaled a slow breath that she interpreted as empathetic, but also suggested his mood was shifting toward impatience.

“There’s no need for you to decide today,” Ona Sonta continued. “If you have any reservations whatsoever, then please you should leave. I’d rather lose a donation than a client’s respect.”

As if to reinforce that message, she said nothing more. In the ensuing silence, Echo raised her head and, for the first time since entering the room, felt excused to look around.

She didn’t know exactly what she expected Professor Ona Sonta to look like—some kind of a cross between an unctuous mortician and a stern librarian, perhaps; but she certainly never would’ve guessed that the curator of the world’s only archive of suicide notes would be such an elegant woman. When Echo arrived for her appointment, Ona Sonta answered the door within seconds of her pressing the bell and greeted her with “Felicitations.” She offered a two-handed handshake, multiple bracelets glinting and tinkling on her wrists, then invited Echo to enter with a sweeping gesture, like a real estate agent showing a new home to a potential buyer. She was dressed in a long, blue pleated dress with a rounded neckline, beneath a matching jacket with embroidered fleur-de-lis designs on its lapels. Her hair, streaked with silver, was cut in a chin-length bob and parted to reveal a broad, unblemished forehead, the likes of which Echo always associated with deep thinking. High temples sloped into shallow eye sockets; her irises were grayish blue. Her lips plumped when she spoke, then deflated into thin lines to listen.

The professor’s desk was gray steel, the kind that Echo considered more appropriate for the office of an auto shop or a loading dock. Attached to it was an L-shaped extension with a computer and a large, curved-screen monitor. The screen savers flashed a rotating sequence of striking color photographs taken from the Webb Space Telescope. Behind her desk, the door

to the stored collections was closed, with a sign above it that read, "Enter by Permission Only." Echo shivered pondering what lies beyond.

"Perhaps it would be useful to help if I told you more information about this depository."

"I visited the web page," Echo said.

"Which provides only the most basic information, so that serious patrons will seek to make direct contact with myself. This also discourages pranks."

"Pranks?"

"Unfortunately, this is so. There are such people."

Echo noticed how when she said this, Ona Sonta glanced at Émile.

"There is not another collection like this anywhere in the world. Yes, this is a department of the state university, but it relies more upon gracious private funding to support its mission than unreliable monies from the state. Every artifact I receive is thoroughly processed, cataloged, indexed, and kept in both its physical form and but is also digitized. Part of this institution's function is to memorialize the persons whose words are preserved herein. We encourage loved ones to visit. However, to prevent any possibility of misuse, we do have careful regulations about who may make use of our materials, and how. This is a research institution. Scholars come from all over the whole world to analyze the content of people's final thoughts.

"When I tell people this, they are often skeptical. There is yet still a stigma attached to the study of suicide. But however, I have dedicated all my life's work and resources to the goal of suicide *prevention*. If I were ever able to close the archive because there was no longer any need for its services, I would be very happy, indeed I would."

"*J'en doute,*" Émile mumbled for only Echo to hear; she elbowed him in the side, then turned to Ona Sonta and said, "All right. I'll do it. I'll donate the letter..."

That was as far as she got before again breaking down into heaving sobs and cascades of tears. The sudden outpouring caught her off-guard, like a seizure. She pressed her face against Émile's chest and wept, rubbing her brow into his ribs, until he steadied her with an arm around her shoulder.

Émile raised his neck when he spoke; "*Peut-être, madame,*" he said to Ona Sonta, "We can arrange to meet again in a few days."

Echo was relieved that he'd spoken on her behalf, thereby deflecting the professor's attention away from her. The gist of her pain was anger, which she worried might show, to her discredit.

"Yes, certainly of course. Come back at your convenience."

"*Allons-y,*" Émile said to Echo, helping her to her feet.

"Thank you for your kindness," Ona Sonta said to them on their way out the door, then added, as she was shutting it behind them, "And it was good to see you again, Émile."

Professor Ona Sonta's job was more a calling than a career. It was the only job she'd ever had. When her father finally embraced his own demise, he left his entire personal collection of terminal correspondence, acquired during 20 years as a hospital administrator in Vilnius under Soviet rule, to the university with gratitude for its assistance facilitating his immigration. The sole condition for this gift was that his daughter, who knew the collection better than anybody other than himself, oversee the establishment and eventual operations of this unique repository. After thirty years of service, she had no plans to retire, ever.

She came to think of her vocation as filling a societal need, but one that nobody else was willing, able, or had the necessary perspective to dispatch. It required a balance of altruism and stoicism to do this job. Committing to it was pretty much a lifetime assignment—there were no opportunities for advancement in a field where she was the only practitioner, and even lateral mobility was limited because the unusual experiences of this position provided few transferable skills.

That being so, she was resigned to working alone. Most of her clients, she never met more than once. Her nominal boss, the dean of the university library, seldom visited the archive, as if relieved to leave it to her. Her few colleagues she knew primarily by email. Most of the institution's benefactors preferred to remain anonymous.

But solitary work didn't completely suit her. Occasional intercourse with a smart, inquisitive person helped to keep the job from becoming morbid. Furthermore, running the archive was enough work to warrant another full-time staff member. Rather than assume the responsibility of managing human resources, Ona preferred to conscript interns from the library school at Kent

State. For one academic semester per year, if there was any interest (often, there were no takers), she hired a student to perform a guided internship at the archives for minimum wage and six academic credits.

Émile Dujardin was the best intern she'd ever had. He was also the only one that she ever had to fire.

She hired him after just a phone interview for reasons that, upon retrospection, she realized were biased and haphazard. His accent reminded her of the summer she spent in Paris as a young woman. He was in the USA on an F-1 student visa, which was how she, too, first came to America. He pronounced her name correctly on the first try. Most persuasive, though, was how when she asked him if he had any questions for her, he gushed, "*Ici, c'est incroyable*. Never was I imagining that dossiers such as these existed. I find it *très* fascinating."

Ona had never heard anybody describe the collections of her archive in such superlatives. "Unique," "distinctive," and "unusual" were the most common attributions. The dean of libraries referred to them as "rare," which indeed they were, for every acquisition was one-of-a-kind. At the last state library association conference, Ona overheard a colleague refer to her realm as "macabre."

On his first day on the job, Émile was waiting outside when she turned the sign in the door from "Closed, Kindly See Our Hours" to "Open by Appointment Only." When talking to him on the phone, she'd formed the impression of a debonair bohemian, wearing a beret and a scarf tied in a loop knot. In person, he was shorter than her, with eyeglasses so thick they made his eyes bug out. He always kept a 3"x5" spiral notebook in the breast pocket of his shirt, and often took it out to scribble down some sudden inspiration.

Ona gave him a tour of the facility. It was one of three suites in the downstairs of a two-story general office building off Indianola Avenue, against Walhalla Ravine. There were three rooms, the smallest of which, and the only with a window was the reception area where her desk was located. She spent little time there, except to meet with clients, donors, and supporters. Most of the work was done in the processing area, immediately behind the door on the other side of her desk. This was a dimly lit area with a flat-top table, atop which was a letter sorter, a clock radio, and a shoe box full of pencils, and beneath was a locked file cabinet. Across from the table were two computer workstations, one which was crammed with equipment—a scanner, digital camera, a CPU with dual monitors, and miscellaneous office

supplies like a tape dispenser and a vertical file. The other workstation, the more spacious of the two, with a leather upholstered seat, had a laptop on it; this one was reserved for clients.

“Of great importance, you must know that you will work with extremely private and sensitive information,” she said. “You must respect my subjects’ privacy as much as if they still lived.”

“*Bien sûr*. I understand.”

“Each item in my collection must be thoroughly indexed and enhanced with metadata,” Ona explained. “Scholars may ask, for example, for such characteristics a subject’s age at their demise, ethnicity, relationship status, whether the correspondence was addressed to a specific individual or to whom it might concern. I myself developed a thesaurus of keyword terminology related to suicidal ideation that was recognized by the American Psychological Society.”

“*C’est vrai?*”

“Indeed, yes. These letters contain great insights into the human condition. For example, I recently cataloged a set of terminal correspondences written prior to *failed* suicide attempts. One might wonder—is there something in their written words that correlate to a latent desire to live? My database has provided primary source material for five doctoral dissertations and dozens of peer reviewed articles.”

“How did this place come to exist? But, why?”

Ona noted that, like many people, Émile conflated those two questions.

“Follow me,” she said, descending a set of stairs into the temperature and humidity-controlled basement. The long, rectangular room, with a single narrow aisle, was covered from floor to ceiling with filing cabinets and archival shelving filled with rigid boxes.

“Here, my collections are stored.” She stepped aside for him to see. “But in answer to your first question, notice on that wall,” she pointed, “there is a framed artifact. That is the first item cataloged here. Written in 1782, its author is not for certain known, for it was signed by six men. They were soldiers, but so too murderers; they engaged in a bloody massacre of nearly 100 peaceful Christian Indians at Gnadenhutzen, in eastern Ohio. In the weeks after the killings, these six began to have terrible nightmares. They made a pact to sacrifice themselves together in atonement. This letter is their joint statement. By somehow, the letter wound up in a time capsule that was

buried in the statehouse lawn in 1850, then retrieved in 1950. It was sent to the university library.

“Over time, the library acquired more such letters from persons or agencies that did not know what else to do with them. Word of mouth led to more bequests, and from farther away places, eventually from around the world. An anonymous benefactor gave funds start a separate depository in 1990, since when it has grown by many times in size.”

Émile covered his mouth with his hand, at first Ona thought to catch a cough. A chortling, apparently involuntary spasm rose from his esophagus. He swallowed but couldn't hold it in and finally let go with a barrage of laughter.

Dumbfounded, Ona waited for the moment to pass.

He sputtered, cleared his throat, then finally managed, “*Désolé*. I was remembering what Camus said. *Je ne suis pas pourquoi*, but I had to laugh. Sorry.”

“What was the quote?”

“He said, *Il n’y a qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c’est le suicide.*”

“My French is not so good. Does this mean that suicide is a seriously true philosophy?”

“*Presque*. It means, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”

Ona did not understand nor wish to discuss what this meant, much less why Émile found it humorous. She resumed the orientation by logging onto the computer and demonstrating the basics of entering records into the database. That was the only time she ever heard him laugh.

Émile caught on fast and worked even faster. A month into his internship, he had completely scanned and indexed the backlog of recent acquisitions, and Ona was so pleased with his attention to detail that she assigned him the task of searching for obituaries.

Probably most of all, she appreciated that he asked so many questions. Previous interns seemed wary of analyzing these documents too deeply, as if they had some internal resistance to entering into the minds of their authors. Émile, however, treated each record as if he was preparing to deliver a eulogy for the person. What were the author's personal details? What did the author's handwriting suggest? Where was the letter left to be discovered? On his own

initiative, he developed a ranked system of content retrieval correlating various criteria, such as methods, motives, and demographic data. When he spoke to Ona about his work, he referred to documents' authors by their first names.

"Many regard suicide as an act of love," he said to her one day, "because they believe that their loved ones will be better off without them."

"This is a common delusion of suicidal thought," she answered him.

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps, not."

In the final month of his internship, Ona permitted him extraordinary freedom in developing his own projects. That was a mistake, she soon discovered. The author of one recently acquired letter complained that Émile had written to him, and then called, asking painful questions about his unsuccessful suicide attempt. As she subsequently discovered, Émile had presumed to follow-up with several subjects who had left suicide notes but survived the attempt, seeking information about their personal reflections on the experience of wishing themselves dead. He concluded these interviews—if he got that far, which wasn't often—by asking, "Do you ever still think about doing it?" He stored this research in a file that she found in a folder labeled "miscellaneous" in a subdirectory of files from the old Ohio Lunatic Asylum. She assumed that Émile put it there to hide it from her.

Ona was aghast. This violated the basic rule that she'd conveyed to him on his first day. This was an offense that warranted firing. Still, she didn't, instead writing an official letter of reprimand—the first and still only she'd ever written for any intern. She gave it to him personally but asked him not to read it in her presence. If he had any questions she would answer them, but otherwise the letter spoke for itself, so she hoped that there'd be no need to ever speak of it again.

"*Mais non*, madame, I have gathered much very important information..." he began to protest.

Ona made a slicing gesture across her throat to silence him. Émile accepted the envelope from her, eyes heavy with remorse, and muttered, "*Je vous demand pardon*." She winced; she'd become accustomed to him using the informal *tu* with her. He asked to leave work early that day, saying he felt ill, so she bade him to take off as much time as he needed. In parting, she kissed him on both cheeks.

That evening, Émile Dujardin attempted suicide by ingesting a handful of Nembutal tablets. A neighbor found him face down on the floor in the half open door to his apartment, having collapsed apparently trying to leave, perhaps, Ona speculated, during the throes of last-minute regrets when he'd gone seeking help. She later wondered if it had occurred to him to call her, or if not, why.

Ona did not learn of this near tragedy until the following Monday, when she found an envelope with "Professor Sonta" written on it taped to the door of the archive. It began, "Please accept with this letter my apologies for what I must do."

Ona sat on the floor, crossed-legged with her back to the wall, and held the letter carefully, by its edges, while reading it over and over and over. The letter was dated two days earlier. By the time she read it, the act was done—or not. It was somewhat a relief not knowing. Either way, she never wanted to see him again. This time she "let go" of him, so he could concentrate on regaining good health.

It required her to exercise uncharacteristic forbearance, but Echo was good at reading Émile's reactions, and the way that he bit his lip when Ona Sonta uttered those parting words to him warned her against asking for immediate explanation. Likewise, he avoided saying anything about their visit to the archive, as if to avoid giving her permission to bring up the subject. This led to an awkward drive home, because anything other they tried to talk about felt forced, like small talk that served no purpose save to postpone an inevitable discussion.

For the first time since she couldn't remember when, Émile made her favorite, coquilles saint jacques, for dinner that night. When he served her, she asked, "what's the occasion?" He shrugged, "*rien de special*," and filled her wine glass. His nonchalance seemed guarded.

After dinner, though, when the table was cleared and the dishwasher was running, during the hours of their domestic routine when they drank wine and chatted before turning on the television, the strain of avoiding the subject became more than she could bear. Émile reached for the remote control. Then, finally, Echo broke down and asked the question that had been bugging her ever since they'd left the archive—

“Why did that woman—Professor Sonta—say that it was good to see you again?”

Concurrently with her asking, Émile pressed the power button on the remote. On the screen, the channel five weatherwoman stretched across Franklin County to show a cold front converging from the west.

“It looks like rain,” he said.

Echo tsked. “Really?”

“I was sure that I told you, *n’est-ce pas?*” Émile spoke over the weatherwoman, who predicted “much cooler temperatures.”

Echo extracted the remote from his hand and turned off the television. “No, I’m sure that I’d remember if you did,” she answered him.

Émile removed a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. “I was knowing her in graduate school,” he explained at length.

“Was she, well, a friend?”

“That, I would not say. We met during my internship. *Vraiment*, I was not knowing her well, and that was by choice. I found her to have a strange air about her.”

That was true, clearly. It took a person with peculiar attitudes and predilections to pursue a career organizing the grim scripts of disturbed minds. Echo could scarcely imagine a more depressing job.

As many times as she’d read the letter that he ex, Monte, clutched in his hand to be discovered along with his hung body, it still set off fresh tremors of revulsion within her. She’d had no idea of the dark thoughts going through his mind. How could she, having rarely seen him since their separation. Even if she had, though, what could she have done?

Nothing! That’s what everybody told her. Why, then, did she feel more anger than grief? And more guilt than anger.

“Did you know that she worked at that depository?” she queried further.

“*Je ne sais pas*. That is, I might have heard something to that effect, from some long time ago. But I was not thinking about her since many years. And if not for the sad news about your Monte, I would never have thought about her again.”

“He is not *my* Monte,” Echo objected, then upon reflection added, “We split up three years ago.”

“Of course, I meant no such a thing. *Mon coeur*, you are absolutely without blame.”

Echo slapped her hands on her lap and cried, “Then why in the fuck did he address that letter to me!”

Émile bowed his head. It wasn’t the first time she’d asked him that question. Previously, he’d responded with various assertions of her innocence and declarations of his affection, but these were condolences, not answers, and that was why she kept asking. Was there something wrong with how she loved? Only Émile could tell her.

“He was not in his right mind,” Émile said. “And so wrote insane things.”

Although she tried to steel her face, she felt the emotion swelling in her cheeks and behind her eyes. “I can’t stand this anymore,” she blubbered. “I have to get rid of that letter.”

“Yes, you should donate it to the repository, where it may perhaps be useful for somebody.”

“That’s the problem! I don’t want anything useful or good to come from it. Monte doesn’t deserve that for doing this to me. I’m going to burn that goddamned letter.”

“*Non, ne le fais pas*. In the contrary, give it to me. That way, you need to have nothing more to do with it.

The letter was in a manila envelope, on the coffee table in front of them. She reached for the envelope and pressed it to her chest, and said, “I should never have let you read it.”

“I want only to help.” Émile put his hands together, palms up, as if begging. “Hand it to me, and I will give it to Madame Sonta. Or I will burn it, as you wish.”

Echo grimaced thinking about her options, none of which appealed to her. She felt her heartbeat accelerating, and growled “mmmmm, ahhhhh” in frustration. At once, she took the envelope in one hand, grasped it by the edge, and tossed it forehand across the room, like a frisbee.

“Burn it,” she said to Émile, “and flush the ashes down the toilet.”

Émile went without making an appointment, even though he knew that by doing so he risked being turned away. Ona did not like drop-ins, for it signified presumption, or carelessness, or just a general lack of respect. The repository was not the kind of place where a person stopped by on a whim. Furthermore, it was after hours, although he knew that she often worked long after the doors were closed to the public and her car—identifiable by its yellow, green and red Lithuanian flag decal—was parked in the lot. When he rang the doorbell, she answered over the intercom, and Émile introduced himself by asking for five minutes of her time. After a pause, she responded, “Of course. Five minutes is not too much for an old friend. I’ll be at the door momentarily.”

An old friend? Émile wondered. He’d never considered her a friend, exactly. But not a boss, either. More akin to a mentor.

Ona unlocked the door, nodded and smiled at him, then shooed him inside, locking the door behind him. Émile was so stunned when she greeted him with a hug that he could not reciprocate with anything more than a pat on the back. She rolled the swivel chair from behind her desk and invited him to sit in it, while she removed a pile of folders from a straight back chair and turned it toward him, straddling the seat backwards.

“I had anticipated you to come back,” she said.

That seemed presumptuous, even though he had, in fact, always intended to return, with or without Echo’s donation. It helped that he had it, though.

“*Merci*,” he said, although he wasn’t sure he should be thanking her.

“Although I also looked forward to seeing Ms. Dujardin, as well. Or am I too bold to assume that she is your wife?”

“Yes, she is *ma femme*. But, by her choice, she did not take my name.”

“Of course, she is American,” Ona surmised.

It sounded to Émile like an implicit insult, although he somewhat agreed with the sentiment. “*Pourtant*, I am bringing the letter,” he said, taking the folder from under his arm and showing it to her. “We discussed much on this subject, before she decided that, yes, she would like to give it to the depository, to you, for your collection.”

“Shall I sign a donor receipt?”

“No.” Émile said, then realized he’d been too quick to reply, so he added, “She is more content to be anonymous.”

“Of course. I know that this was traumatizing for her.”

Émile presented the manila envelope to Professor Sonta in both hands; she accepted it with her left hand and brushed him lightly on the wrist with her right hand. To his mind, the gesture conveyed something more than just professional courtesy. It was as if she was giving him permission to broach the subject he’d really come to discuss.

“Similarly, *à propos* this subject, I would like to ask you, madame, for a favor.”

“Yes.” She said it as a statement, as if she knew what he was going to ask.

“*Je vous demanderais*, that is, I would like to ask, if you please, could you return to me the artifact that I left for you, some years ago, on the final day of my employment.”

She rubbed her chin, as if thinking.

“It was a letter,” he added.

“Oh, I do know to what you refer,” she assured him, “And I know exactly where it is.”

“Then *peut-être* you can understand why I want it returned to me.”

“I do understand why you ask,” she said, even while shaking her head side to side, “But I cannot do this for you. It now belongs to my collection.”

Émile opened his mouth to raise an objection, but nothing came out but a puff of dry air.

“Once written,” Madame Professor Sonta said, “It is as good as done.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregg Sapp is a former academic librarian and library administrator at four universities, who is taking advantage of retirement to write fiction, nonfiction, and satire.