

## THE ORAL EXAM

*By Melissa Knox*

The pale tall girl with the long dark hair bit down on a fingernail. I saw her pupils dilate. She put her fingertips on the edge of the table, as if to catch herself before she fell. My colleague Kurt, her other examiner, cleared his throat, and she gasped.

I wondered whether she might actually faint. I wanted to tell her the exam was just a test—not the proverbial end of the world, and not a Ph.D. orals. I felt sure she'd pass, even if my stiff colleague wanted to fail her. Each time he'd looked her way, her eyes had widened, as if in fear.

“When Eliot wrote *Prufrock*, he did use something like metaphysical conceits,” my student said, exhaling.

I smiled. “Good!” She smiled back, and talked about Eliot and alienation.

Kurt, whose job it was to record my questions, scribbled intensely. Why was he writing so much? He seemed intent on taking down every word. All he had to do was indicate my seven-word question, in shorthand.

The point of his pen banged the page strongly enough to rip holes in it.

We were sitting in Kurt's office, all Scandinavian modern and 18<sup>th</sup> century Hogarth reproductions. Not a speck of dust, not a scrap of paper on the polished floor, no pens or books scattered across his desk. Everything in apple-pie order. An antique brass hat tree, its arms curving up like an anguished candelabra, stood in a corner with a Burberry raincoat on one arm and several of Kurt's Homburg hats plopped on the others.

I preferred my husband's office or my own, with our leaning towers of books, our plants, our unwashed coffee cups, our grubby linoleum and dusty red throw-rugs.

The student quoted Eliot's line about the patient etherized upon a table, and her face told me she was hanging on by her fingernails.

Kurt's cell phone zinged, and he grabbed it as if it were some wayward imp he planned to chastise. With a look of contempt, he put it down again.

In mid-sentence, the girl paused and started before stammering, “uh, the confessional poets were . . .”

“We'll turn to your third area, late 19<sup>th</sup> century,” snapped Kurt, picking it up his phone again and tapping it. His cheeks ruddy, his eyes piercing, he leaned toward the girl, who went a shade paler. He opened his mouth as if to bite her, and then I couldn't stand it anymore.

“I've got a question here,” I interrupted. Kurt's eyes blazed, as if I'd stolen his firstborn child. Or maybe his hockey stick.

I flipped my computer screen toward him.

“Her instructor sent the question,” I said, and read it out.

“Uh . . .” said the student. “It’s, uh, um . . .” she took a deep breath. “Could you rephrase that?”

“Of course!” Kurt said, glaring at me. “Please discuss eugenics. You do know what they are, don’t you? His nostrils flared. “You’re familiar with the term? In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.”

“Yes,” she said, “I *do* know. I just feel a little strange right now.”

She fumbled her way through the last question. Then we had to send her out of the room to discuss her grade.

Kurt nodded at me. I felt extremely annoyed. Apart from the yelling, he seemed to reside in the year 1955. Kurt wore Harris Tweed suits, complete with vests, and those Homburg hats. I had on dangly, tarnished silver earrings from Mexico, an old pair of jeans, and a sweater my thirteen-year-old daughter had knit all by herself. You could tell no one had helped her. I hadn’t dyed my hair lately, and the roots were gray. I looked like what I was: a hippie in late middle age, pear-shaped from childbearing and lack of exercise. A frump.

“I would think an A- or a B+,” I said. “She—“

“Absolutely not!” His face red, his eyes fierce, he was sweating through his tweed suit, leaning too far across the table, his slicked-back hair flopping forward.

For a moment, I thought he’d chew through the wooden table between us like a large, angry mastiff—and sink his fangs into my leg.

I pushed back in my chair, glanced out the window at the dull, industrial landscape. Kurt’s office was the only one in the department with no plants and nothing personal. Not even a photo on his desk. Didn’t he have a girlfriend? A guy with a girlfriend wouldn’t be so mean.

I reminded myself that I didn’t like him, noting with consternation that my heart was pounding like that of a teenager at a ninth-grade dance. If there’d been a plant in front of me, I’d probably have absent-mindedly plucked off a leaf, folding it in half.

I paused for a moment, wondering exactly what I had been doing.

My hands were folded in front of me. I saw my thumbs tapping themselves as if they were also annoyed, and realized with horror that I’d copied one of Kurt’s most affected gestures. Who did the man think he was, Claude Rains? I flattened my hands on the table with a smacking sound that almost made him jump. I could see a vein bounce in his forehead.

“She’s a *good* student,” I said. She’d done fabulously in his course and in mine; she’d messed up slightly in her third area of concentration and now he wanted to give her a C.

“I’m *not* giving her a B!” Kurt stuck out his jaw.

If he had been older, I’d have wondered about heart attacks, but he was a youngish man to me—about forty. I was possibly old enough to be his mother.

I took a deep breath. “You say she did well in your course—she got an A- from you. She also gets an A- from me. I don’t see how you—“

“She didn’t seem to me to do as well in your course!” Kurt yelled.

I told myself he was a little, yapping terrier, not a massive, maddened mastiff. I imagined him sitting there in his underwear, then in a diaper, but my heart was still hammering.

“It’s not up to you to decide how she did in my course, Kurt!” Now I was yelling. I suddenly felt exhausted. I wanted to put my head down on the desk.

Kurt’s eyebrows arched. He shook his head.

“Kurt, she quoted Eliot and Sylvia Plath from *memory*—“

“She completely ruined her last field! That was a catastrophe!” Kurt said. Beet-red and sweaty, he looked as though he’d run a marathon.

“I don’t know what you mean. I wouldn’t call that a catastrophe. She was slightly less articulate—“

“It was a catastrophe!”

Suddenly Kurt seemed large. A slight man, he now appeared pudgier and taller than I’d remembered. Or maybe I felt smaller. I had a moment of doubt—could the student’s third field have been worse than I thought? I’d been giving exams all day. Could I be getting soft? One look at Kurt, however, told me he was either insane or pompous. He enjoyed being tough. Why did that make me so tired?

“She deserves an A-, but I could do a B+,” I said.

“She should get a C!” Kurt said. He slammed his pen down. “A C means she has done satisfactory work.”

“I’m *not* giving her a C,” I said. “That’s what we give them when they’re barely able to mumble their way through a plot.”

Kurt’s cell phone zinged again. I started to wonder if he timed himself in the toilet or the shower. We’d been in his office arguing about the student for five minutes, about three minutes longer than normal. Other students were sitting out in the hall waiting to take exams.

I opened my mouth and what came out, to my surprise and sorrow, was, “Okay, we can give her a B-.”

“All right!” Kurt smiled, as if he’d won the lottery. I got up quickly, left his office, and had to return for my purse. I hung my head down.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot my purse,” I mumbled. He smiled at me and I felt myself flush as I left.

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When I crawled into bed with my husband that night, and he reached for me with a smile, and we had the hottest sex we’d had in weeks, Kurt’s voice, face, hands and other body parts added spice to the moment. Afterwards, I felt guilty. I couldn’t stand Kurt; attractive was the last

thing he was. But here I'd been fantasizing about him. All that yelling and screaming turned me on—it was such a change. I hadn't fought with anyone but my children in years. Had I missed fighting? Did that make sense? And what did my shameful fantasy matter? I'd kept it to myself. When I woke up in the middle of the night to pee, as women who have had four children do, I went up to the study, opened my computer, and reassured myself. Every website said I was typical. I knew that. Why was I looking up this crap? My feet were freezing. I went back to bed and inhaled my husband.

But I didn't want to be normal. I wanted to be faithful, body and soul. I didn't want to be ashamed of an attraction that revolting little Nazi—now that Kurt wasn't sitting in front of me he seemed both little and Nazi-like. I laughed out loud and my husband gave a startled snore. Kurt was German, but like all Germans we knew he was appalled and guilt-ridden by the Holocaust. No, he wasn't the man in my fly-by-night fantasy. He was just something different. I was preoccupied with a man I found tedious and an exam that was over. He was overbearing, choleric; I should have dug my heels in and awarded the girl a better grade. That was all there was to it. Right?

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Ten days later, I was in a tiny jewelry store packed with Persian rugs, because my husband wanted to buy me something special. I ran my fingers through the turquoise and the polished green minerals whose name I did not know. We had just placed three necklaces and some Byzantine earrings on the grainy oak table when the bell to the shop door rang, and who should appear but a laughing, relaxed Kurt, and on his arm, my student, the girl I'd failed to defend. Before they saw us, they were kissing.

My husband and I smiled at them. Kurt flushed and I was forcibly reminded of his anger during the exam. Spicy. I could use a twinge of spice in a conversation, as long as I didn't have to live with it. My husband was patiently unhooking a stubborn clasp around my neck as the two of them walked in, and remained calm enough to undo it successfully.

As Kurt was huffing, "Let's go, we're late," my student came toward me. With a laugh, she cast a glance at him over her shoulder and he smiled a slavishly appealing little smile.

"I just wanted to thank you," she said, "It was nice of you to stick up for me."

"You're welcome," I said.

I glanced at Kurt, whose expression was that of a child caught in a lie. Then I knew what to say.

"You seem to have done satisfactory work, Kurt," I said, in the most school-marmish tone I could muster. The girl, our student, was so clearly in charge, had always been in charge. The jeweler, an eyebrow slightly raised, slid our boxes across the counter. My husband and I reached for each other's hands at the same moment. We sauntered out together as he whispered,

“was that slightly mean?” and we chuckled, the way you do after thirty years knowing each other’s little ways.



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Melissa Knox’s recent work has appeared in *The Wax Paper*; other poetry and nonfiction has appeared in various places. She teaches American literature and culture at the University of Duisburg-Essen.

