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*Bestiary: Oriental Salad with Peacock/Imaginary Academics*

- Fragment -

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I. Ingredients

“Instructor, we must, indeed, take steps to cut down on the institution’s expenses.”

I could hardly agree more, in principle, with the Head of Department’s dilemma. Wary of what might follow, I replied promptly: “I hope you’re not considering a pay cut. My salary is already minimal. I don’t think it can possibly get any lower.”

The HoD froze, fork in hand halfway between his plate and his trembling lips. He was probably trying feverishly to work out the difference between our respective salaries. Or perhaps he was just formulating the following observation, which he uttered decisively: “I went to the Gents the other day.” Upon which he gobbled up his steak and sauté. I hesitated for a moment. Presumably, none of my colleagues had heard the remark. Or they preferred – with exquisite gastronomic fastidiousness– to ignore it. After all, the steak and sauté were, indeed, delicious. But our HoD wasn’t the kind of person who would settle for half measures. Swallowing, he continued: “And the toilet was leaking! I checked again after a few weeks.” It wasn’t clear whether in the interim he had stopped frequenting only the area in question or the entire institution. “Just imagine, sir, the toilet was still leaking! No wonder we’re running a budget deficit!”

This was, indeed, an unprecedented solution. Certainly the rector had not considered it at the festive meeting (or at the review meeting, it wasn’t clear to me yet which it had been) that had just taken place in the largest auditorium of the University. It is true, though, that at the said meeting special mention had been made of the recent repairs to the whole plumbing system of the building. To no avail, as it turned out. At that

fateful moment, the rector passed by behind us, hurriedly exchanging pleasantries with all the staff members assembled in the cafeteria. The HoD seized the opportunity: "Sir, it is unacceptable! I went to the Gents the other day. The toilet was leaking! This is intolerable! As it is, the maintenance and administrative staff outnumber the faculty... And not one of them ever goes into the Gents to see how the toilet is leaking!"

I tried in vain to devote my undivided attention to the contents of my plate. By then it would have become impossible for any of my colleagues not to associate the *sauté* with certain reminiscences of a specific – and specified – area of the institution. None of them, however, dared cast so much as a glance away from their own plates. For some reason, I had the distinct impression that intense psychosomatic effusions were bringing the Department members together in an otherwise hard to reach consensus. The rector's reply escaped me. It is most likely he didn't say anything.

While I was leaving the cafeteria I found myself subconsciously pestered by a nagging idea. When I arrived at the one place of deep introspection and complete privacy in the University – no, I'm not talking about the library's reading room – I suddenly understood, with instant and complete relief, the nature of the recurrent idea. Could it be that the relentless deluge our Head of Department had been talking about was the trickle of water benignly running over a few toilet freshener tabs to remove the odour? As I concluded my business, I dismissed the possibility concessively. However, the day was far from being over.

In the department room the Professor was waiting for me. His age had prevented him from partaking of the feast. Taking off his thick-rimmed glasses, through which he was meticulously studying some illegible notes, he turned his grizzled head to look at me, pertly smacked his lips, then accosted me head-on: "Have you had a copious lunch, Instructor?"

The *sauté* insinuated itself into my unspoken reflections for a moment. Cautiously, I went for the ambiguous answer: "You have, indeed, missed out on a real treat, Professor! The food went deliciously well with the conversation."

The Professor regarded me with suspicion. Full of mistrust, he didn't follow up. I was, once more, grateful to him. He showed exquisite tact. "I'm glad to hear it. I have something to ask of you."

It was my turn to look at him with suspicion. He didn't usually have anything to ask of me, being perfectly aware of the – meagre – interest I took in the subject he was teaching by vocation and I by accident. Our professional relationship was unequivocal and could therefore be described as perfect. A dim intimation of its perfectibility aroused in me a momentary feeling of uncertainty. Conciliatory by nature, the Professor was quick to reassure me: "Nothing serious. I would just like you to type on the computer the exam topics and bibliography list for your upcoming promotion. The Dean requested it two weeks ago."

How could I have told the Professor that it was my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday and that I was, therefore, expected back home? Resigning myself to the prospect, I reached out my hand to grab his illegible jottings. "Of course, Professor, most willingly!"

Sitting in front of the computer I experienced sudden pangs of conscience: was it the seventy-year-old Professor's microscopic, wavery, stenographic handwriting or, having played the false, ridiculous part of seminar convener for a tedious course for two years, was I still unable to recognize the names of the authors and the titles of works in the core bibliography? At that very moment my mobile phone rang. To my surprise, I read the Dean's name on the display. This certainly promised to be an endless day.

"Hello, Madam Dean?" I suddenly asked awkwardly, absurdly hoping that, maybe ...

"Yes. I've just remembered that today is your birthday, so this is to wish you 'many happy returns.' I apologize for ringing you up so late, but I really wanted to give you my best wishes."

Well, I certainly hadn't expected this. It was practically the first time the Dean had called me and not the other way around. I didn't know how to react.

"Thank you," I uttered tersely.

It was her, once more, who found a proper way to continue:

"You are at home, I assume."

Glimpsing an un hoped-for opportunity to show off my – otherwise non-existent – interest in the object of my professional activity, I chimed in eagerly, in a resolute voice:

“No, Madam Dean. I’m in the department room, with the Professor, deciding on the topics and the bibliography for the promotion exam.”

Silence at the other end of the electromagnetic waves. Only then did I experience a kind of existential unease. Truth to tell, it wasn’t good form for me to inform the Dean that I was just drawing up the list of possible topics for an impartial competition. On the other hand, I felt slightly less guilty because I was still completely unacquainted with most of the authors on that list anyway. Hence, impartiality continued to exist. This line of reasoning, however, was not something I could publicly expound. I was facing a real dilemma. Madam Dean solved it offhandedly:

“I’ve made it myself. Please tell the Professor that the deadline for its submission to the rector’s office expired quite a while ago. I had no choice.”

I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt relieved, for the second time that day. There was still one problem: telling the Professor. Thinking of the warm, cosy intimacy of home, I braced up and said:

“It seems, Professor, that we no longer have to type this list on the computer. Another list has already been submitted.”

With expansive gestures he removed his eyeglasses, smacked his lips several times – this tic had developed into a distinctive feature of his personality – weighed up the sudden turn of events, then made his decision:

“Very well. Dear colleague, I still have one more request, if I may.”

The prospect of going home was receding further and further into the future at a cracking pace. Definitely, this was not an easy day.

“Would you please accompany me to Court tomorrow?”

At that very instant, the sauté I’d had for lunch suddenly returned to my mind, and not only... With a slight discomfort around the area of the soft palate – as the Professor would have put it – and feeling exhausted, I eventually managed to articulate:

“Of course, Professor. Most gladly.”

On our way out, my distinguished colleague added:

“And happy birthday, Instructor! You’ve turned a wonderful age today.”

No doubt, he was cut from a different cloth. I still didn’t know which day of the year was the Professor’s birthday, despite having been, by mere chance, his assistant for the past two years. I suddenly wished – for the thousandth time – that my student years had never come to an end. At the very least, they weren’t so full of uncertainty.

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