

4-21-98

Ren

After Paul left the Dean's office to start the Institute of Statistics at VCU, I was flattered to receive a request to apply for an instructorship on the faculty of the English Department. As long as Paul had been Dean, the Virginia nepotism rule prevented my being on the Arts and Sciences faculty, for the Dean, among his other duties, manages the salaries. The English Department Chair had previously expressed interest in my credentials. I was interviewed by all the proper people, the department Chair, the acting Dean, and the Provost. I was hired as an Instructor to begin teaching full time the following September.

I spent a pleasant summer preparing the courses I would teach: English Composition and Rhetoric, and a Survey of World Literature. The week before classes began, I was assigned an office and an office mate, Lorenzo Kaye, who was beginning in the department at the same time I was. He was a young, attractive blond, a graduate of the University of Virginia. We chose our desks in the small office we were to share and began the process of getting acquainted. He was young, the same age, it turned out, as my older son George.

Ren and I taught sections of the same composition course, but he taught a Survey of American Literature rather than my World Literature assignment. We had much to discuss, of course, about our approaches to the instruction of composition as well as about our textbooks, the Hodges Harbrace College Handbook and an anthology of essays. I had used an earlier edition of the Handbook when I taught at the University of North Carolina, so I was familiar with it; the essays were new and interesting. We immediately discovered that our approaches to the infinitive were different - he split them, and I didn't - a minor difference we never settled, but on most points of syntax, grammar, and writing we agreed fairly well, allowing for a generation difference in age.

When Ren discovered the similarity of his and George's ages, he seemed to delight in telling me about all the experiences he had in college with drugs and alcohol. Although I was happy that I had not known him when George was still in school, I enjoyed his tales, though some of them sounded somewhat apocryphal. Otherwise, we had a chatty, relaxed relationship, seldom even having difficulty with sharing our small office when both of us had student conferences. The fact that he disliked early classes and I preferred them helped, although I usually stayed the full day and he came in only for classes and necessary office hours.

Ren brought in his old electric coffee percolator. I quickly decided that the brown coating of the pot was distasteful. Fortunately for our continued friendly relationship, he came in just as I was preparing to scour the pot. He claimed the brown build-up improved the flavor of the coffee and should not be eliminated. I was delighted when the old pot soon expired, and I could bring in my own four-cup glass coffee maker, sparkling clean. It really did make much better coffee than his percolator had. He allowed his mug to acquire the desired brown color and I kept mine pristine clean. We shared the expense of

the coffee and provided creamer and sugar for our new faculty friends who frequently came by for a cup, perhaps partly because our office was near the department office and the elevator.

After a couple of years I was made Director of the Writing Center, a part-time assignment which I greatly enjoyed and which reduced the number of courses I taught, keeping me around the corner in the Center a large part of the day. But Ren and I continued our cordial exchange of teaching and personal conversation.

Ren was an exceptionally bright young man who had completed his Bachelor's and Master's degrees and had only to complete his dissertation on a contemporary Southern writer to earn his PhD. He was an excellent teacher, with a quite different teaching style from mine, but we had similar results in the success of our writing students. He was moderately prescriptive in his writing assignments, frequently telling his students *how* they should reorganize and reword their compositions. I was more *laissez faire*, preferring that my students develop their own styles with a minimum of correction from me. Ren and I occasionally discussed our differences in instruction without actually changing the way either of us taught. We each felt there was no reason to change what worked for us.

Because neither of us had received a PhD (I indeed had never started mine), we were not on a tenure track. This designation meant that all such instructors were hired for a maximum of four years, after which we could continue as adjunct but not full-time faculty. (Adjuncts taught only "on call" and did not participate in departmental planning or other affairs, and they were paid much less.) It was a condition about which we had known from the time of our beginning to teach. Ren had made no progress on starting his dissertation, although he read copiously in his chosen field, and even if he had completed his degree, there was no implication that he would be hired for a tenure-track position. He had an active social life with his wife in addition to his athletic pursuits. He played basketball with other young faculty men every week and trained year-round for the Richmond Marathon.

We had both seen a number of our instructor colleagues reach the end of their four years. Most of them grieved for the end of their instructorships, and we hated to see them leave. When Ren's and my four years were up, my situation had changed. He would be terminated, but I would continue as Director of the Writing Center and as a teacher of English as a Second Language, still a part of the English Department. He was not happy with his termination or with me but decided to continue as an Adjunct Instructor. As a part-time member of the faculty, he was assigned another office which he was to share with several other adjuncts. He did not turn in his key, preferring to use his old office. I had no objection until my role in the Writing Center and teaching English as a Second Language made it necessary for me to have private counseling appointments with students who were having difficulty in writing or acquiring skill in English. Such students were upset by Ren's bursting into the office and disturbing the confidentiality of our relationship. I explained to him that, when my door was closed and locked, he was not welcome to interrupt. Our longtime cordial relationship ceased on the spot and he stopped speaking to me. I missed him and wished we could have maintained a casual friendship.

Although my appointment was extended beyond the standard four years, I knew that before my seventh year on the faculty I too would have to leave. (The seven-year exclusion was to prevent my becoming automatically tenured, at least in the eyes of the American Association of University Professors.) When I reached my final semester, I was delighted that the Department planned a "retirement" party for me. So that I could include colleagues outside the Department, the Chair asked me to give her a list of guests I would like to invite to the party. Considering Ren's coolness, I did not put his name on my list, but someone added his name supposing that I had accidentally overlooked him. He came to the party and did speak to me. He clearly enjoyed seeing the rest of his friends. A poster which I had used for publicizing the Writing Center was turned into a wonderful present for me, signed with good wishes by every member of the Department. I couldn't help noticing that Ren did not sign his name. I would have treasured it as a remembrance of the four happy years we had in sharing views and our small office. I couldn't help feeling sad about him, but I did not let him spoil an otherwise lovely occasion.

