

### **Hurting Myself**

My optometrist is giving me semi-hell about not coming in sooner. Or else he's kidding, I don't know. Going on about how important your eyes are, if you take care of them they'll be there for you when you need them, how I'm only hurting myself. My fists each go to the tight shape of my heart. The "Our Records Indicate..." postcard is dated November 15 and here it is late January. Is that a long time vision-wise? I could tell him there are things a person has to take care of beside their eyes, some of which might be equally important. Like their car having a message light that says Limp Home Mode. Like deductions taken on their taxes by their wife which they now have no idea what they were for and can't defend to the IRS. Like credit card limits arbitrarily lowered after a week spent out of town to try to alleviate the pressure of the above, with the person's not particularly helpful mother, who cries while making soup and may be dealing prescription drugs in her co-op.

But what if he's just doing a parody-character of the Upset Doctor and he's about to laugh and clap me on the back? Which seems equally possible? I don't tell him any reasons for my putting off coming in. I just listen as he harangues me, taking in each piece of evidence, from the tone of his voice to the details about eye disease, trying to calculate as if my life depended on it if he's serious or if here comes the clap on the back.

*Serious or joke, Ron?*

I think of the punishment if I get it wrong.

It turns out he's joshing/warning to make a point. It's that new comedy where you can't tell. Okay buddy? he says. As he writes down my new numbers I look at a plastic eyeball on his desk, cut in half with the parts labeled. As I try to memorize the parts' names I wonder if the body knows they are separate parts. He tells me we'll have to watch for that glaucoma and reminds me prescriptions change. One day, he says, you notice you're tilting your head to more clearly see the next shopper in the checkout line, who maybe has a great pair of tits!

My stomach clenches. I tell him I never look at the next shopper in line, and would certainly not ogle his/her breasts. *I must be Caesar's wife*. He smiles like he doesn't believe me but is too polite to call me on it. He tells me to remind that pretty lady of mine her appointment's overdue as well. Okay, I say, I'll do that. The sigh doesn't go out of me until I reach the elevator.

I'm in the office of Equity and Diversity at Mendocino College At Upper Breakneck. We can't say sexy or tits at work unless quoting a complainant. We can't say possible she-male over there, or nice buns, or I've been noticing your bulgy pecs, Mister Hunk. We can't ask why don't we get together after work and discuss this over a few Dirty Coitus On A Beachtowels. We are Geiger-counters for others' potential discomfort, offense, unhappiness, sad feelings. We are three full-timers, two assistants and an administrator who spends an hour each day watering her office plants, none of whom has asked me why Melody took off. Unchained Melody. The impression this leaves me with is, no one cares. Even some friendly ribbing might be nice, like: wow, Ron, maybe if you dressed better! Just give me a clue.

The Office Administrator is Patricia, who has a way of looking just below your face like nothing you say could make any difference because she's made up her mind about you. I've been there two years longer than my next-closest colleague, Colin, but I don't have a degree so there's an argument to be made for me being second in charge behind Patricia, but also a point against it. A lot of paperwork gets bumped to me instead of to Colin or Eunesta, who defer to my seniority on filing, but on the other hand both of them can make me feel mentally disadvantaged with the drop of a phrase. I am in that place of wondering: if Patricia quit, what it would be like to make an extra few hundred a month? Versus do I want the responsibility? There are conferences to go to. Which might be fun? But I'm not a firecracker speaker. It might just be more pressure building up, another visit to my mother. Plus, there's getting to the airport with my car. It's an older Jag but they charge for service as if you bought it new. My mother gave it to me for \$00 because she said at her age she no longer needs to drive. Then the whole hip thing. She'd probably like the car back, but I'm here and she's there. Hey listen, she says, but she never outright asks. I don't have a good inheritance of joking from her. She walks a very plain line, like a slug knowing the other side of the road must be there somewhere.

A hundred years ago, our college buildings and dorms were the facilities for Garrett Mining, whose employees, mostly Chinese, were paid in company scrip, had to buy their food, cookpots and clothing at the company store, and who went on strike for decent conditions in 1889, during which thirteen of them were shot by company goons and a boatload of bowler-hatted thugs brought up from Pinkertons. In those days the town was called Branneck. But then: "the Branneck Strike"; "the infamous Branneck

Massacre” – therefore, *Breakneck*, taken from the Native American word for the long cloud-covered floodplain between the mountains and the slow, copper-smelling river.

Can you build something educational where once they murdered Chinese people for asking to be treated like human beings? Should you? If this was a real question I would get it wrong. Patricia doesn’t let us say Chinese. *Asian*, she says. I ask, what if they’re from China? Asian, she insists. What’s wrong with being Chinese, I want to know. She also won’t say Mexican, though she’ll say Guatemalan all day, turning the G into a W, and Nicaraguan, same deal. *Hispanic* is preferred to Mexican, she writes on my memos. Or *Latino/Latina*. Why not Mexican? Some find it offensive, Ron, she says. Who, Guatemalans? Just change it, Ron. But it’s a whole country, like Canada. Who decided? No one ever gives me a good reason, just: sorry, Ron, you’re wrong. *Wrong Ron*.

I’m the one who once a year has the thankless task of pestering the faculty to take the online Racial and Gender Sensitivity course. It’s two hours and you can’t skip because the electronic pages only turn so fast. I do it watching TV and eating. The answers are so obvious I don’t know who’s learning anything. *If my teacher says I have a pretty face, should I: a) sleep with him/her because compliments like that don’t grow on trees; b) slap him/her across his/her own pretty face; c) report the incident to the Office Of Equity And Diversity*. Everyone comes crying to us. We catalogue the complaint and sit the parties down. Discuss, defuse. The college has a million dollars of liability insurance. I try not to think how far away that would buy me.

A wide brown photograph of this end of town taken from up on the Ridges in 1888 hangs next to our water cooler. Time-lapse smoke from ad hoc chimneys smears

over corrugated metal roofs and men in broad hats with dirty faces stare unsmilingly up at the camera from rutted roads. The photo is hand-lettered in white paint to identify the smelting plant, assay station, company security. These are today Soils And Chem Admin, the Humanities Faculty Lounge, us at E & D.

I wish I lived back then. Even despite the mud, even despite the Pinkertons shooting me. I would run for the hills. Just leave everything I owned and run. I wouldn't ask Equity and Diversity to figure out whether the bullets posed a threat to my freedom to self-determine. I'd just lank it out of there.

Eunesta is 30 and African-American and gives the impression she's always going somewhere, like she can't talk because she has to leave right now. Colin is an old unreconstructed hippie (*hippie* pejorative? *Post-Woodstock American*?) with long grey hair tied in a carpenter's braid behind his head, and who I'd guess was likely a cool, pot-smoking guy in the seventies but then something happened to him. Like probably the eighties. Colin can go in a heartbeat from joking with Eunesta to dead serious when I walk in. Maybe he sees me as his competition for second-in-command. Could be he got burned after not acting with appropriate gravity somewhere else he worked. That's all a job like this needs, someone who's had their behind scorched and is still stinging over it.

On some paperwork once it said we must be like Caesar's wife, above suspicion. I was a business major, I don't know about Caesar. I asked in Review, why don't they just say Cleopatra? Ha ha, it was another *Wrong Ron-ism*.

I try remembering if I ever told a beard joke, or a long-grey-ponytail joke. How did I bring this about? It's not like I call him *Melan-Colin*. It's not like I repeated that phrase until even his wife was saying it.

Patricia and I butted heads Friday. Someone in Engineering called a professor a bitch. Our third bitch this semester. But this one is a male and so is the person who made the remark, a quick-speaking homosexual. He said on the phone it was a “campy reference, mutually understood as such, come on!” Complainant is a mature female student of color who was in the room. Come on, I told Patricia. Let this one slide. Like the woman who wanted us to impound a student’s truck for its CD player which had played a song with the *n-word* loudly at the food bank drive-through. If this is a complaint, I say, how about someone’s cartoon on our corkboard with the caption *Da doo Wrong Ron, Da doo Wrong Ron?* That’s not offensive, she said. Really, I asked, trying not to betray sulkiness. Are you going to make a big stink about this Ron, she said. Her hair and scoldy expression making her look like Margaret Thatcher.

Anyway. The bitch went into the log and now I have to call in the prof and both students. Colin and Eunesta and Gavvin the assistant are laughing about it already. “When’s your bitch-fest, Ron?”

I hope it wasn’t Eunesta. Who put the cartoon up. But really, there isn’t anyone good who could have put it up.

*Harmful words encourage harmful thoughts, which incite harmful actions.* It says that on a poster in the room where we do Review. The others like to pitch me hypothetical cases, some of which are real and some made up. It’s my least favorite time and place, to where even just seeing the wire-back chairs sends a sprig of water to the middle of my back. Always it seems after I tell what I think, they either say I’m taking things too seriously, suggesting I’m old-fashioned and unhip, or that I missed a potentially dangerous campus provocation. I hate this exercise. A grey cloud comes over

the room, knowing with each comment from me either they'll say wow Ron you're losing your grip that one was a joke for heaven's sake lighten up... or else, *really* Ron? You would laugh at a real current problem that's common with today's kids who already have such a social burden on them?

For example: a TP is offended by a form of address (she calls him "that man-woman...") used by an exchange student from Malawi, and the Transgendered Person addresses the person from Malawi back as a *Chewa*... but the Malawian is actually ethnic Mwake. Whose offendedness should be given first place in the complaint line?

On this one I guess real, and ask with my notepad in my lap if they have many Transgendered Persons in Malawi and what is their status? And is there traditionally tension between Chewa and Mwake? But it was fake. Everyone breaks up laughing. It's not even Mwake, Colin tells me, it's Ngonde. As if everyone knows this and I'm just waking up. I nod in small motions looking at the ground, like, ha, good one on me. My spit goes sour.

Did you get the memo, Gavvin asks, coming in late. Ron? About the kid who called another kid a dago? No, I say, what department was that? They all crack up laughing. No one says dago any more, Colin informs me. That was slang from a whole other era. I'd better brush up. There's a summary of contemporary derogatory terms in the You-Go-Suck, he tells me. Thanks, Colin, I'll look at that. Could I call the Unified Code Of Sexual, Ethnic and Workplace Conduct the *You-Go-Suck* without an instant uproar? I think, negative on that.

They describe a student who tried to take over a group discussion in Chem Lab, who was called by his TA a *little dictator*, which, because he's Jewish and short has

given him a rash on his neck and privates and made him lose sleep. He submitted his sleeping hours for the past week to the office, says Colin, all pathetic one-hours and twos. Should we talk to the instructor? I think I see a smirk, but he has that beard thing.

I ask clarifying follow-ups, betraying no assumption of ribbing. I can't afford it. I try to create a clever straight-man 'character' who won't get in trouble if I'm wrong on a serious one but also won't seem too stiff and laughable if I flub a joke one.

I mean does a doctor really care if you wait two lousy months to get your eyes checked? I should have caught that. I should have used my straight-man 'character.'

Short (like me) and Jewish, with "*little dictator*" – this seems too much. Plus the rash on the privates? I smile, to say, *gotcha*. Patricia avoids my eyes. Eunesta hands me the kid's sleep-time log. Only half an hour Sunday night. *Oh Ron*.

I've asked Patricia if she could stop them doing this. It dilutes the time available for real cases, and it's unseemly, I said, to be jesting about potential offences. She waves a hand, says there's nothing wrong with encouraging workplace spirit, "taking practice swings," as she puts it.

Except the practice swings are at my head. My head that already has a headache and no wife. How do I get out of this? Where do I go? Who can I submit a Form 1219 to?

I stand and look at the picture over our water cooler. There's a man on a wooden boardwalk skewed over the mud outside the assay office with what looks like a long spoon in his hand. He's about my height, wearing a wide-brim hat and a buttonless jacket that's too big for him. Though the picture was taken from a long way off, even in that large photograph you sense his face. He looks up, raising the wooden spoon in a



gesture of *I see you, in the year two-thousand-something*. They're going to shoot me in ten months and leave my children fatherless. They're in Harbin, they don't even know where I am. Those were hard lives, short and unrewarding. Whereas today my doctor wants me to beg his forgiveness for not running right over when I get his Smiling Eyeball postcard. Like he's a Protected Class with a grievance. He makes me have to guess if he's serious or subtly ribbing about me being the one who'll suffer in the future for my carelessness in the here-and-now. I know when I'm suffering, believe me. I have a picture of me in 1888, wishing I'd never come from China, waving with my spoon and saying come here please from your clean office, do something useful for once, save me.

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