

## From "Three Failures"

**T**HIS CLASS, THIS CLASS. When I assigned this class a film review, they went out, just about all of them, and lifted their text from newspapers and magazines. One of the sources was easy to track down: a Pauline Kael review—words one through five-hundred, that is—right out of the current *New Yorker*. This was a young woman who couldn't write two consecutive coherent sentences in English, or any other language, and she had painstakingly transcribed several columns of Kael's sinuous, looping prose, one delicate participle after another, transcribed *ennui*, *lugubrious*, and *pellucid*, without ever once suspecting that I might notice that she hadn't written it. I remember an editor at the *Herald* reading me another review over the telephone, both of us excited because we had *found* it, *yes*, and he said, "So I gotta tell George, what, is this some kind of advanced journalism class?" "No," I said, "it's freshman writing," and he said, "Maybe I won't tell him." I asked them to write a description of

something small, smaller than your hand, and I got an encyclopedia article on a spider, another on bees, and the entry on "Nail" from the *Random House Guide to Home Repair*. One tall, pimply boy had his friend or his mother write a paper on the third assignment, and it was nothing like what he had written on the first two. When I asked him for a draft, he gave me one, *in someone else's handwriting*, and, when I pointed this out, he said that this person had "helped him a little." Later that day, perhaps forgetting that I had been studying his handwriting, he left a note on my door: "Mr. Gun sucks hairy moos cock," with a skull and crossbones.

This was in Burlington, Massachusetts, not far from a huge shopping mall, in the spring of 1980. The students had been admitted to Northeastern University, but they had chosen to do their first year in a dismal brick building on a slab of asphalt, right near where they had all gone to high school together, rather than brave Huntington Avenue,



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where there were trolleys, museums, people of color, real professors. My car had blown a head gasket, on the way back from some other miserable job, and I had to take a series of buses from Kendall Square out there three times a week, only to have these frightening thugs sit in front of me, placid, snickering, and impenetrable, one week after another, and maybe I would talk after class with the other English professor, Mr. Tutein, a gangly, neurotic man with a high pitched voice, writing a science-fiction novel, I think, who said this was a relaxed place, I should *relax*, and then I would get on the bus again and come home to the apartment I shared with Lisa in Oak Square, where I had the number of classes remaining written on a piece of paper taped to the inside of a kitchen cabinet, and I would cross one off and open a beer. The dean who administered the Burlington campus said, like Mr. Tutein, that I should *relax*, get to know them, and so I refereed some of their lunchtime basketball games, until one of my students, on a team suffering a humiliating rout, undercut an opposing player intentionally, pushing his legs while he was in the air, with both hands, in an effort to hurt him, and I threw him out of the game, and we were back where we had started. My dissertation advisor said that I didn't know, maybe I was having some effect on them that wouldn't show up until later in their lives. But I knew enough to recognize this as an instructor's last, desperate line of defense, the thin wooden railing at the edge of the cliff, with impotence and despair below.

ON THE WEEKENDS, that spring, I spent a lot of time downtown, wandering aimlessly, trying to imagine a different life. Lisa worked at the Boston Public Library on Saturdays, and I would meet her for lunch, say, and then walk over to the Museum of Fine Arts to grade papers in a small room full of line drawings, or wander through the Fenway to Hemenway Street, past the Berklee College of Music, and then perhaps over to the Gardner Museum to sit for a while in the courtyard, watching water dribble from the mouths of stone lions and looking up at the cracked lavender stucco on walls.

AS THE WEATHER got warmer, I sometimes played basketball at the Fenway court, where there was good game, mostly black guys my age or younger, with lots of clawing and scratching and backboard-rattling. The place was crowded on the weekends; even in the morning, you'd have to wait two or three games before you had a chance to

play, and if you lost in the middle of the day, you knew that you might as well leave. And so I was excited, one day, after dropping Lisa off, when I got to play, finally, with a solid, hustling team, full of good defenders, the kind of team you could stay on with all day, featuring two chunky, muscled guards, who went right at the basket, hard, every time. Once the game started, I rebounded, kept the fat kid on the other team out of the game, collected a few loose balls, set some screens, and tried not to do anything stupid. After a few points, the stud guards began to trust me: they stopped shouting "here, here, man" every time I touched the ball, and they occasionally let me handle it on offense. The game stayed even, mostly because the other team had a tremendously good player: a tall, thin guy, in cut-off sweats, shirtless, with incredible strength, quickness, and agility, a player with a soft dribble like Calbert Cheaney or Sean Eliot, who dominated play at both ends. He glided past the rest of us, went over and around us, took the ball out of our hands, blocked shots. At ten-ten, though, he made a bad play. He got the ball in the wing, took two dribbles to the right and cranked up a leaning shot, from a little too far away. It clanged off the side of the rim and hit the fence, and he said, "My bad," running back and hitting his chest. A few seconds later, at the other end, I cut out to the left wing and someone threw me the ball. I turned to face the basket—an orange rim and a chain net about fifteen feet away, bolted to a perforated silver backboard—and the fat kid didn't guard me, so I shot it.

You have to understand: this was like a dog talking, or a tree hailing a cab. I hadn't taken a shot all game—it wasn't what a slow white player without moves was expected to do, in a game like this one—and *this* shot was the one that would determine whether we stayed on, with a chance to play all day, or went to the end of the line or, more likely, with five or six groups of players lounging in the bleachers, talking to their girl friends and spinning basketballs in their hands, home. Even the good players wouldn't usually settle for a jump shot in this situation, with so much at stake; they all wanted to drive, take it in close, jam it if possible: we got the ball, let's make it *count*. I don't know why I did it. But it was an easy shot, one I had made maybe ten thousand times in my life, and I was wide open, so I didn't think, everything fell away from me, and I just shot, looking steadily and firmly at the basket, lifting my arms straight up and through the ball as I released it.

When the ball went up, one of the kids on the

side said, "Game." In his voice, there was a mixture of excitement, begrudging admiration, and parody. He was going to play with the next team, and so part of what you could hear was: *It's our turn now; take a seat, you sorry motherfuckers.* And maybe he also thought: *This guy is going to win the game.* But there was also a hint of the tone you would use with your little brother as he dribbled around you in the driveway (*You're bad, little guy*), or the tone the bemused Frenchman on the other side of the fence uses in *Stalag 17*, as he listens to an earnest British prisoner outline some half-cocked plan in his language: *Que tu parles bien le Français.* This one word rang out, *game*, with all its implications and suggestions, as the ball hung in the air, and for a second anything was possible. I rose up out of my

class at Northeastern and into my new life, no longer sucking hairy moose cock, somebody to be reckoned with.

THE SHOT WAS SHORT and off to the right; it hit the front of the rim and bounced out toward the foul line, right into the skinny kid's hands. "Motherfucker," said one of the guards on my team. I took off after the skinny kid as he headed down court, and somehow, as he jumped, I got a hand on the ball, but it made no difference, and as he laid it softly off the backboard, he looked down at me and said: *See you later, chump.*

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