

Lost in the Meritocracy

The Undereducation of an Overachiever

Walter Kirn

"Is this Walter Kirn?" asked the phantom of Nassau Hall.

"It is," I said. "It's him." Anxiety over poor grammar ensures poor grammar.

"The provost would like to meet with you next week about a confidential matter. Would Wednesday at noon work?"

"Any time would work. May I ask you a question?"

"Please," the ghost said.

"How bad is it?"

"It's good."

The meeting spot was a modest diner across the street from Princeton's grand front gate. A letter I'd received the day before explained why I'd been summoned: to talk about another overseas scholarship, less coveted than the Rhodes but more exclusive (only a handful were awarded each year) sponsored by the Keasbey Foundation, an organization based in Philadelphia. I'd applied for the Keasbey at the urging of a junior English professor, the cheerful medievalist whom I was fond of because he paused between his sentences and went light on theory. He'd won the Keasbey himself a few years back and thought it the finest scholarship on offer because it gave winners a choice of

universities—not just Oxford, but also Cambridge, Edinburgh, and even Aberystwyth, in Wales—as well as supplying a generous "wine allowance" of a few hundred dollars per year. I asked why this was. "It's in the will," he said. I asked him whose will. "Marguerite Keasbey's."

I ordered a BLT and perched on a stool in the window of the diner, wondering how I'd recognize a being whose title had always been a cipher to me. It was easy, though. Provosts behave exactly like provosts. They shake your hand a moment before you're ready, they lay a heartening arm across your shoulder that drops away the instant you feel heartened, they lightly scold you for using your own money to buy your BLT, and they don't touch their coffee after the first sip because they're granting you their full attention, which they somehow convince you that you deserve.

"The first round of judging for the Keasbey is done by the university itself. That process has been concluded. Concluded in your favor, I'm pleased to say." He brought out a sheaf of neatly folded documents and slid it across the Formica toward my plate, a gesture familiar from movies about espionage. I followed what I gathered to be the script and immediately tucked the papers out of sight, in a pocket of my jeans.

"Don't lose those. Make sure to read them," the provost said. "They contain details on next week's interview."

"I'm grateful. Thank you, sir. Sincerely. Wow."

"You don't want to read them now and ask some questions?"

"Is that what you want?"

"It's whatever you want."

"Really?"

The provost accompanied me back to campus, a ghostly red carpet unfurling before him that I was allowed to set my feet on, too. People waved at him, people I'd never seen before. I imagined that they were deans, administrators, and I wondered through what quirk of quantum physics they'd suddenly managed to gain materiality. At the foot of the staircase to Nassau Hall's front doors, watched by the twin bronze tigers, who were purring now, I received a second provostian handshake, a second fleeting shoulder clasp, and then he was gone, in a twinkling, my own Saint Nicholas, traveling undercover in a brown suit. I touched the papers in my back pocket. Real.

The euphoria only lasted a few minutes. In my dorm room, I sat down on my bed next to the leafless potted plant in which I sometimes urinated when the hike to the men's room felt too long, and handicapped my chances in the last round. The Rhodes debacle had broken my confidence, but rather than learning from it the obvious lesson—that I should prepare for auditions before the wise ones—I doubled up on my old strategy of conjuring mercy through helplessness and squeezing inspiration from despair. I drifted through my classes the next day, and every day for the next week, astonished anew by how little four years of college had affected me. The great poems and novels mystified me still, particularly the ones I'd written papers on, and my math skills, once adequate for the SATs, had atrophied to nothing. The science classes I'd been required to take, on geology and psychology, had been graded pass-fail, and though I'd passed them, barely, I'd already forgotten what "igneous" meant and where in the brain short-term memories were stored.

Worse, I had no prospects. All around me friends were taking positions with worldwide corporations and securing places

in lofty grad schools, but I had nothing but three sheets of paper, one of them mapping the quickest route from Princeton to downtown Philadelphia, the site of my upcoming ultimate rebuff. I'd never bothered to contemplate the moment when the quest for trophies would end, as would the game of trading on previous trophies. Once I had nowhere to go but up. Now I had nowhere to go at all, it seemed. The only suspense was what shape defeat would take. There he goes, the Ivy League grocery bagger. There he lies, the hobo with the diploma.

"Stop it," said V. during one of my moping orgies. My interview was just two days away. "This is unwarranted. And it's beneath you."

"It isn't Kierkegaardian? No, you're right. It's Schopenhauerian."

"The fact that you can even make such jokes means that you've come further than you know."

"But you're the only person I can make them to. They're good for another few months, until we leave here, and then I'll be all alone with them," I said.

"You don't know what 'all alone' means, obviously."

"What? It means something different in Pakistan?"

V. nodded. Not immediately, reluctantly. Then he folded his hands and stared down into his lap. He seemed disappointed in me, or in our friendship. I began to understand. His time here was precious, he'd stolen it from his government, and he'd paid for it with a separation. The fact that he'd spent so much of it with me—who not only didn't appreciate the privilege but didn't appreciate anything, apparently, beginning with himself—must have struck him as a ghastly waste.

Chapter Seventeen

I RODE DOWN TO PHILADELPHIA WITH PRINCETON'S OTHER Keasbey nominee, the starting quarterback of the varsity football team. I'd never expected to meet him in this life. He was smaller than I thought he'd be and a sharper, more impressive talker. Under his short haircut he seemed sad, though, as if he, too, were confronting the possibility that his young life had climaxed in some way. His car was old, with poor radio reception, not a quarterback's car at all, and I realized that he wasn't one anymore, except in memory. The season had ended several weeks ago, and Ivy League football players seldom ever went pro. As my father had, they played for parchment, for degrees they might not have been eligible for otherwise. Then they tucked them under their arms and ran.

"Thanks for the lift," I kept saying as we drove on. I meant it, too. I liked the guy. He had the reflexive politeness of college athletes who are obliged to kiss up to rich alumni, but his willingness to do a rival a service—on the morning of a game day, no less—was evidence of something beyond good sportsmanship. It spoke of serenity, a mellow fatalism. Fortune was going

to speak in a few hours, but until then he planned to leave things to themselves, which isn't how quarterbacks are meant to think.

We parked downtown and followed the provost's map to a stony office building, past whose revolving door and up whose elevators was the main office of the law firm which administered the Keasbey Trust. In the stodgy reception room we met our adversaries—five or six students from the other top colleges that the fellowship's snobby benefactress had deemed worthy of sharing in her legacy. The tension I'd felt at the Rhodes assembly was absent, perhaps because there was less prestige at stake. The world didn't know that we were there, and the newspapers wouldn't publish the results.

A secretary led us to a larger room, where the trustees were sitting at a table that had been waxed and buffed and waxed again, for decades and perhaps for centuries, until the shine was thicker than the wood. Most of the trustees were older men, their faces soft with patience and good humor. I felt instantly comfortable with them, convinced that, unlike the tribunes of the Rhodes, they'd long ago abandoned any notion that society could be perfected or that the world had any single great problem—let alone one that a squad of model citizens could sally forth and solve. Indeed, the professor I knew who'd held the fellowship had told me that it wasn't for eager beavers, whiz kids, or perfectionists, but "interesting individuals." I asked him to be more specific, but he demurred. He said only, "They'll tell you when you get there. You have a treat in store."

The proceedings began with a lengthy presentation by the water-sipping head trustee, who spoke in the fashion of a medieval sheriff reading out tax rolls in a public square. His dry style didn't suit the narrative—the astonishing life and most pe-

cular last wishes of Miss Marguerite Keasbey, the spinster heiress to a vast asbestos fortune—but it did render certain details a bit more credible and help to satisfy us, his dumbstruck audience, that we still resided in present-day America and hadn't passed through a portal to Dickens's England.

The saga wasn't structured as a saga but it quickly became one in the mind, after the footnotes, digressions, summaries, and boilerplate legalisms were thrown away. It opened at a spring formal held in the gardens of an Oxford college. The blushing Miss Keasbey was new to such occasions, but not so new to them, one gathered, was the gallant British undergraduate who strode with her arm in arm onto the dance floor and showed her the time of her life, quite literally, because she not only remembered the dashing bachelor throughout her sojourn on this earth, she gave instructions when she left this earth on how to continually resurrect him. This would be done by funding a fellowship, complete with ample wine allowance, for the education of young Americans who, with the proper training, Miss Keasbey hoped, might someday wear her escort's cummerbund.

End of Part One. We were asked if we had questions. We certainly did, as the trustee surely knew, but perhaps too many to ask. If I could have asked only two, they would have been: "Is that really Philadelphia out the window?" and "Why do people bother to write novels?"

Part Two of the presentation was not as colorful, but it was just as melancholy, for it spoke of the age-old losing battle that romance wages against reason. Miss Keasbey had plainly stated in her will that her largesse was to go to males exclusively, but a court challenge waged in the name of civil rights had made young women eligible, too. The trustee didn't mask his displea-

sure with this travesty, this trespass against exquisite private fantasy by thuggish public interest, but there it was, and there it would remain. The old man grimaced and fell silent. He seemed to be reproaching us, and the girls among us most of all. Ours was a low and literal generation. In the name of equality we'd murdered fantasy. In our rush for a place in the sun, we'd stamped out the moonlight.

He seemed to be offering us a chance to leave, to confess our unworthiness and go—everyone but the prince who knew he was a prince, everyone but the disguised young Lancelot who'd traveled here not to win advancement in the sorry modern quest for status that had replaced the chivalric jousts of Camelot but because he'd been beckoned in a vision by a pale maiden clad in finest asbestos.

That's when I started to pity the other applicants. That's when I recognized them as impostors. They didn't belong here, and soon they'd be cast out, leaving behind them nothing but glasses of ice water. Because despite what the trustee went on to tell us about the supposed fairness of the judging ("Miss Keasbey's original wishes notwithstanding, you'll all be given the same consideration"), I knew that there would be no judging, really.

There would be a homecoming. A welcoming.
Because the true mad knight could only be me.

The trustees interviewed the ex-quarterback first, which gave me time to work on my persona as a ramshackle budding ladies' man whose intelligence was instinctive rather than practiced and whose sense of adventure had sometimes harmed him but not

enough to cause him deep regrets. If my schooling had taught me anything, it was how to mold myself—my words, my range of allusions, my body language—into whatever shape the day required, but now, I sensed, I faced a different challenge: to put forth an ideal version of my real nature.

It worked. I could do no wrong that afternoon. I was in a state of grace. When one of the trustees brought up my D in Spanish—that glaring stain on my academic record, which the Rhodes committee had also noted, provoking in me much defensive stuttering—I confessed that I'd stayed up late drinking before the final and let it go at that. This elicited grins and merry twinkles. When they asked me about my athletic interests—or, rather, my apparent lack thereof—I replied that I like to exert myself in solitude, by taking long, meditative evening walks. "Very British," said one trustee. When they asked me who my favorite author was, I replied without hesitation: Lord Byron, as much for the life he'd led as for his writing. And when, toward the end, they asked me, hypothetically, how I would occupy myself abroad during the breaks between academic terms, I said, "I don't believe in planning vacations. I believe in taking them."

"What a pleasure. We thank you," the head trustee said. "I'm sure there's much more we could chatter on about, but I'm afraid others are patiently waiting their turns and we've run over time. By quite a bit."

I rose and moved down the table, shaking hands, and all of the handshakes felt like secret handshakes, as though we were exchanging palmed golden tokens. It appeared I'd come through, and by doing what I did best: treating the room as a text and reading it, first to myself and then aloud, to everyone. But this time I'd done it openly, not furtively. Because this

time—a time that I thought would never come—it wasn't mastery they wanted but a certain vain and errant daring.

They wanted a hustler. They wanted an impressionist. They wanted someone to play a man of mystery who'd caught the fancy of a fool. And soon I'd be off to Oxford as a result. "Result" was not exactly the right word, though, because it suggested that logic governs destiny. But now I knew otherwise. Imagination does. And though part of me had always suspected as much and certain teachers had coached me in the notion ("Imagine that you can be anything you want"), what I hadn't understood at all was that our imaginations don't act alone. One's own imagination is powerless until it starts dancing with another's.

Imagine having been imagined. Imagine.

I couldn't. I hadn't. Perhaps because none of my teachers since Uncle Admiral—in whose imagination I'd been born, but whom I hadn't thought about for years; too busy—had told me that such duets were even possible. No wonder I'd grown so self-pitying and isolated. And no wonder I'd hated Princeton, that dreamland that seemed to dream only about itself (and asked that the world and its students do the same). But then, in Philadelphia, at what seemed to me like the last minute and in the most outlandish fashion, I discovered the truth—if words like "truth" mean anything. And even if they don't, perhaps.

Pause in your knowing to be known. Quit pushing—let yourself be pulled. Stop searching, frantic child, and be found.

Some call this Grace.

I called it Marguerite.

It came for me when I was alone and had no plans, asking for nothing but my company, and in return it offered to cover my studies, fill my wineglass, and teach me how to dance.