

PETER MITCHELL

Gawain¹

PERRY BELLIVEAU MADE A POINT of visiting all the washrooms in Macaw College during exam week. It had become a habit. He methodically checked all the stalls and the receptacles looking for notes hidden among the damp paper towels or taped to the backs of toilet bowls. He thought of it as an important aspect of his job. As Chair of the math department, he had his duties. This annual routine was part of his effort to maintain rigorous academic standards. Besides, he had discovered several tightly written pages of notes ineptly hidden among the paper towels several years before. He had enjoyed his forensic triumph against the forces of darkness (and the letter of reprimand to a student he didn't like very much that followed). Although he was not proud of it, he secretly hoped he could relive the experience.

The great problem, as Perry saw it, was that he couldn't check the women's washrooms. Since the student population of Macaw was two-thirds women, the possibilities of upholding standards—always a challenge at Macaw—were much reduced by the accident of his gender. When Perry was a younger man, he would have unthinkingly assumed that young women would not even be tempted to cheat. Without thinking about it, he had believed that young women were sugar and spice and everything nice—especially sugar—and not given to cheating.

Ursula and Gwen, though, disabused him. The two girls had sat beside each other in his calculus exam seventeen years before. That one had copied the work of the other in the exam was painfully evident. Both Ursula and Gwen managed to get every question on his exam wrong. In itself, this was nothing remarkable. But they'd got them wrong all in exactly the same way. As Perry had explained to them, "there is only one way to get the question right, but there is an infinite number of ways to get a question

¹ One of Arthur's main champions, Gawain, is a chivalrous hero who endures and passes extreme tests.

wrong. What is the probability that you would both get twelve complex questions wrong in precisely the same way and in every detail?"

Gwen and Ursula looked at each other with a question in their eyes.

"I'm afraid," Perry said solemnly, "that I will have to give you both an F on the course."

"Oh, well," said Ursula cheerfully.

Gwen said nothing. Perry thought she was fighting back tears.

But no sooner had they left his office than he heard them laughing in the hallway outside his office. It convinced him that they were hardened cheaters and it hardened his heart.

("You'd think we'd at least have got one of them right," Ursula said, bemused in the hallway.)

"I'm afraid," Gwen said, doing a recognizable impersonation of Perry, "that I will have to give you an F. What a dope."

"We go in, like, failing and we come out failing," Gwen said.

"At least we gave it the old college try," Ursula said.)

Perry was convinced the women's washrooms would be a goldmine of incriminating evidence. The daughters of Ursula and Gwen, he was sure, were legion. If only he could go in and find them.

He wondered if he should ask Megan to patrol the women's washrooms. He was sure she would agree. They had become, not friends exactly, but buddies. And, now that he thought about it, he saw that perhaps Marinelli had been right after all. At first, he had thought it would be a huge mistake. Perry and Vincent Marinelli were occasional smoking buddies. It was Perry's only vice. Marinelli, on the other hand, had many vices. Marinelli had revealed to Perry his weird idea while they were having a companionable butt. Perry had told him with all the force of which he was capable what a stupid idea he thought it was.

"My plan," Marinelli said, "is to dispense with this tedious grouping of departments together."

"What?" said Perry. "What tedious grouping?"

"You know. The math department. This corridor all math people. The English department. That corridor all English people. So boring. So old-fashioned."

"And you're proposing what, exactly?"

"A less rigid arrangement. More in keeping with chaos theory."

"What do you know about chaos theory?"

"I know it sounds nice," said Marinelli. "It has something to do with butterflies, I believe, and the weather. Anyway, it's more encouraging of serendipity. More creative. More inter-disciplinary." He cleared his throat

noisily. "According to Jane," he said solemnly, "inter-disciplinarity is big. Very big."

Perry squinted at him. "Are you talking about a random assignment of offices?"

"A more spontaneously irregular allocation," Marinelli corrected.

"What an awful idea," he'd said. "Terrible. It would undermine order."

"Typical of you scientific types," Marinelli said. "So conservative. So unable to deal with change. So hostile to outside-the-box thinkers like myself. And Jane, naturally."

Perry had thought his smoking buddy was joking. But he'd been serious, and Perry had found himself with a tea-drinking historian on one side of him and psychologist on the other. A psychologist!

But over the first term of the new dispensation he got to know the psychologist, whose name was Megan, and who turned out to be one of the small army of women at Macaw who smoked. She and Perry took to getting a coffee first thing in the morning and going out for a smoke. It was all very pleasant. She rattled on about her divorce and Perry tut-tutted and sympathized generally.

That morning, when it had occurred to him to ask Megan to check the women's washrooms, he looked at her intently and wondered if she would agree.

"He was a Greek," Megan was saying. "When I first met him I thought Greeks were romantic. But you know what Greeks are like."

Perry didn't. He tried to remember if he'd ever met a Greek. He thought he must have, but couldn't say for certain. "I'm not sure I do," he said candidly.

"They're animals," Megan said. "And they have a terrible attitude toward women."

"Oh dear," Perry said.

"And," Megan said with a dramatic shudder, "they're very controlling." Megan moved closer to him

Perry wondered idly how these Greeks could be both animals and controlling. It seemed to him a very inconsistent combination of qualities.

"Sexually controlling," Megan whispered. She had sidled up close to him without his noticing. "If you know what I mean."

Perry found that she was looking meaningfully into his eyes. Was that her breath he could feel on his cheek?

"Time to go to class," he said briskly and smiled as he scampered off.

Megan was recently divorced from this Greek of hers, and so naturally she spoke about practically nothing else. Perry had never been divorced himself. He had been married to Helen for twenty-three years. But he had noticed that his friends and colleagues who had been divorced—and there were quite a few of them—talked about their former wives and husbands incessantly for years afterwards. They didn't usually talk about the sexual oddities of their former spouses, though, in his experience. But then, he thought, most of the divorced people he knew were men. And perhaps women were different in this respect. More frank, more open and candid. He paused in the hall. He thought, perhaps, he would after all ask Megan to check the women's washrooms. That she might have designs on him seemed so very unlikely. It was, when he thought about it, absurd. She was at least fifteen years younger than he was. In fact, she was younger than Ursula and Gwen would be now. And, besides, not to beat around the bush, she was quite a bit more attractive as a woman than he was as a man, or ever had been. She was, he told himself with a smile, out of his league. He must have been mistaken.

"Hello, Professor." The greeting jerked him back to consciousness.

"Oh," he said. "Right. Hello Paladin." He nodded and smiled at the passing student. It would have been a bizarre name on just about anyone, in Perry's opinion, but Paladin Gorski showed a total collapse of cultural continuity. Although he supposed that Peregrine Belliveau was itself an odd enough handle to keep him from being judgmental.

Perry wandered down the hall. He had never seen himself as a particularly attractive person. Not a gargoyle, of course, but not a great prize either. And yet, he knew, even so, life was full of dangers. He remembered the student, when he had been new to the teaching, who had come to his office to tell him that if he was ever feeling that he needed some intimate female company, she was available. He and Helen had laughed about it at the time. All the same, though he couldn't remember her name, he'd remembered that girl for years afterwards. He could still remember what she looked like and the tone of her voice, the look in her eyes and her long, soft lashes.

And, of course, he remembered Mary. She had been the math department secretary, and Perry had fallen in love with her. It had kept him awake at night and troubled his days for many months. With Mary, he could start over and have another life. Not that there was anything wrong with his life—except that it was his: orderly, predictable, known. But he had stayed late one evening in March to tell her that he was thinking of stepping down as Chair. She had said, "But I won't be able to see you. Regularly, you know. And to talk to you."

Perry had said, "I will miss that too. But I'm becoming too fond of you, Mary. Much too fond."

She had glowed for a moment and said, "But that's a good thing, don't you think?"

"No," Perry said. "No, it isn't. I'm married."

Mary said, "Men sometimes leave their wives," and held her breath.

Perry's insides were raging, but he said, "I don't." He must have said it with conviction because Mary resigned a week later. It was a conviction he didn't feel. He was sure he'd done the right thing, but it was hard. Mary had remained for him the road he might have gone down, but didn't.

That three women in forty-eight years, not counting his mother, had found him attractive hardly made him irresistible. And then, he wasn't himself drawn to Megan in that way. She was not at all like Helen. Even less like Mary. He must have been mistaken about her. She had children, he reminded himself.

Thinking unhappily of these things, he saw Marty Chiu pacing back and forth in the hall outside the lab. Marty was a chemist.

"I hate exams," said Marty. "Boring."

"You're supposed to stay in the room," Perry said importantly. "To make sure nobody cheats."

Marty clicked his tongue. "They are too dense to cheat successfully," he said.

"What! All of them?"

"All of them without exception."

"Paladin Gorski," Perry said, with a view to changing the subject to something they could discuss without disagreeing.

"Him too. He's not finished yet."

"It's an odd name, don't you think?"

"Is it?" Marty said. "I wouldn't have said so. What's odd about it?"

"What," Perry asked, "do you mean he isn't finished yet? I was just talking to him."

Marty sighed loudly. "If you want to talk to him, you'll have to wait."

"I don't want to talk to him," Perry said.

"Then why did you say you did?" Marty said irritably.

"Are you saying that he's writing your exam?"

"Of course," Marty said in a very unflattering tone.

"Paladin Gorski?"

"Paladin Gorski."

Perry peered through the little window in the door. "Where?"

"Right in front of you. First seat, second row. But you can't talk to him now. He's writing the exam."

"But that's not Paladin Gorski."

Marty shrugged. "That's the person who's shown up three times a week for the last four months. Plus labs. Of course it's Paladin Gorski."

"But Paladin Gorski is in my calculus class and that's not him," Perry insisted.

"Then there must be two of them," Marty said.

"Two Paladin Gorskis?" Perry scoffed.

"Why not?" Marty said. "It is probably a common name in Russia, or Poland or wherever he's from."

"A common name in ... Ridiculous," Perry said. "I must speak to the Dean about this immediately."

Marty shrugged again.

The next morning, over coffee, Perry told Megan all about it. He was leading up to asking her to do the rounds of women's washrooms. He thought he'd loosen her up by pointing out the complex perfidy of the student population.

"But why," Megan wanted to know, "would two students share an identity? It doesn't make sense."

"One of them must be paying the other," Perry said. "I've never seen anything like it."

Megan laughed and stretched luxuriously. "Isn't it a beautiful day?" she asked. "On a day like this isn't it too gorgeous out to worry about students and cheating. On a day like this." Perry was keen to speak more about Paladin Gorski and took this sudden divergence toward a discussion of the weather as an irritating detour.

"It makes you feel like busting out, doesn't it?"

It didn't make Perry feel like busting out. "Well," he said in what he hoped was a non-committal way.

"When I was on my honeymoon," Megan began, but she broke off with a chuckle. "It's embarrassing," she said and laughed out loud. "What the hell. We went camping," she said.

"You went camping on your honeymoon?" Perry asked, confused. He had been camping himself with Helen and the children, many times, and it had never crossed his mind to be embarrassed about it or to find it funny.

"We went in a canoe. Miles from anywhere. And we woke up one morning and it was just like this. Glorious. Spring and sun. Always makes me feel ... oh, I don't know. Of course, Nick was still asleep. Greeks, you

know, love to sleep. So I took the canoe and went down the river alone. Just because it was so wonderful. I felt wonderful.”

She laughed discreetly. “I shouldn’t tell you this, probably, but I was completely nude. Naked. I wanted to feel the sun on me and the air between ... well, you know. We were supposed to be miles from the nearest person. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise. I would have wanted to, but I wouldn’t have. Anyway, we were supposed to be, you know, alone. That was the point of the canoe, after all. In fact, when you think of it, it’s the whole point of a honeymoon. To get away I mean. From people. You can let yourselves go, completely. Be unrestrained. Establish an independent relationship. So there I am, paddling away and feeling, you know, one with nature or something. All of a sudden I hear cheering. I was paddling right past all these guys. Some kind of seismic crew or something.”

Perry stared at her. “Naked?” he said.

“Stark,” she said. “Those guys enjoyed the show, I can tell you.”

“Pretty embarrassing,” Perry said trying to be cheerful, but with a sinking heart.

“Pretty,” she agreed. “I don’t know why I told you about it.”

“You don’t?” Perry said, because it seemed obvious to him.

“Well,” Megan said, suddenly serious, “maybe I do at that.”

“I was canoeing with my son last year,” Perry said.

“Your son?” she said.

“He’s fourteen.”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s nice.”

“Your problem,” Marinelli said, later that afternoon, “is that you don’t know how to take advantage of an opportunity.”

Perry had gone to Marinelli’s office early. They were supposed to be meeting over the Paladin Gorski affair, but Perry wanted to ask to have his office moved over the summer. He thought it would be best. Marinelli had asked him why and, because they had known each other so long, Perry had told him.

“An opportunity for simple, uncomplicated sex. A woman half your age throws herself at you, and you want to escape.”

“I don’t find Megan particularly attractive,” Perry said, by way of explanation.

“You don’t?” Marinelli said, skeptically.

Perry blushed slightly. “I’m not really sure. I’ve never thought about it. I don’t want to think about it.”

Marinelli made an almost successful attempt to look serious. “I would have thought it was the kind of thing that one didn’t have to think about. She is a nut, it’s true, and a psychologist, but she’s very attractive. You don’t

find someone attractive by thinking about it. It isn't the kind of thing you need to think about."

"Precisely," Perry said emphatically. "That's exactly the problem. At first, it's all hormones and chemistry, but that isn't where it ends, is it?"

"Isn't it?"

"Well, no," Perry said sadly. "Because what people want is a relationship, isn't it? They don't just want sex. There's no such thing as uncomplicated sex."

"What a strange point of view," Marinelli said, teasing the stodgy fellow. "And you have your commitments, is that it?"

"I have. I have my commitments."

Marinelli leaned back and smiled weakly. Poor Perry, he thought, would not be fleeing temptation if he weren't, in fact, tempted. Commitments notwithstanding.

"You see the problem," Perry said, "and you'll assign me another office?"

"Oh I see the problem" Marinelli said, joking. "You're afraid to let yourself go."

Marinelli's secretary, Maria, interrupted. She tapped at the door and stuck her head in to say that Paladin had come.

"Speaking of cheaters," Marinelli said.

"Odd name, isn't it," Perry observed casually.

"Odd?" Marinelli shrugged. "Odd how?"

Perry would have pursued the question of Paladin's name, but he was thrown into confusion.

"Mr. Gorski," Marinelli said, "thank you for coming. Do sit down."

Gorski sat.

"But you're not Paladin Gorski," Perry said.

"Yes I am," Paladin said.

"He's not Paladin Gorski," Perry said to Marinelli.

"Yes I am," Paladin said.

Marinelli cleared his throat and smiled. "See," he said, as if he had been saying so all along, "now we have two problems."

"Problems?" said Paladin.

Marinelli shuffled some papers until he found the one he wanted. "These things always snowball," he said out loud but to himself. "There is," he said, "one student named Paladin Gorski registered at Macaw. I called him at the phone number he gave us when he registered."

"And here I am," Paladin said.

"Yes, but," Marinelli went on, "Paladin Gorski has been taking calculus from Perry here for fifteen weeks. Is that right?"

"I guess," Paladin said. "One whole term, anyway."

"Then why doesn't Perry recognize you?"

Paladin looked surprised. It was a mystery too deep for him.

"I've never seen this person before in my life," Perry said.

Marinelli got up and went to his office door. He returned with Marty, looking sinister, gliding behind him.

"This is not," Marty said, "Paladin Gorski."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Perry said. "He isn't either of them."

Marinelli sank into his chair again. He smiled at Paladin. "You know who this is, of course," he said waving his head at Marty.

Paladin licked his lips.

"You don't?" Marinelli said. "Now I call that strange. An entire term in his class—and a B in the course—and you don't recognize him at all, do you?"

"Chemistry," Paladin said, with what might have been desperation. "I never really caught his name. That's all."

"Ah," said Marinelli, deflated.

"But you're short," Marty said accusingly. "And corpulent. Paladin Gorski is tall. Or tallish. And thin. Like a rake handle."

"But I'm Paladin Gorski," the young man insisted.

"So what do we do now?" Perry wanted to know after Paladin had been dismissed.

"Beats me," the Dean confessed. "I suppose we could try handwriting analysis."

"Handwriting analysis?" Perry exclaimed.

"Because, you know," Marinelli said taking a large and flexible attitude, "we don't actually have to prove anything except that all the exams written by young Paladin weren't written by the same person. We don't have to bother with who they are. As soon as we know there is more than one of him, we can expel all of him."

Perry took the elevator to the underground parking garage. He'd had enough for one day and was going home early. Now that the kids were older, there would be nothing much going on. He thought, perhaps, he would tidy the garden. Get it ready for summer. And then autumn. And winter. He sat, though, in his spotlessly modest car, thought about Mary and wondered if Marinelli was right.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Marinelli wandered out of his office, down the stairs and along the hallways until he came to Megan's office.

She was staring out the window.

"Down in the dumps?" Marinelli inquired as he sat down uninvited.

"A little," she said, trying to force a smile.

"Divorce?" he asked.

She shrugged briefly. "I guess. Sort of."

"You know, of course," Marinelli said, "that you've been terrifying old Perry."

"He's not that old," she said. "Not as old as you."

"No. Not as old as me. But old all the same."

"Besides, I haven't been terrifying him. I kind of like him, actually."

"That would be exactly my point. Perry gets terrified when young women like him."

Megan shifted uncomfortably.

"You're not trying to seduce him, are you?" Marinelli asked bluntly. "Because if you are, you won't be able to. He's rock solid. Completely, inflexibly monogamous. And, you know, you probably don't need any disappointments just now. I thought I should warn you."

"It's pheromones," she said.

"It's what?"

"Pheromones. The apocrine gland, and all that. That's why sometimes we find ourselves attracted to people. We give off pheromones and people respond. It's all unconscious, you know. It explains love at first sight."

Marinelli shook his head. "So," he said, "Are we talking about your pheromones, or Perry's?"

"His. I can't help responding."

"Well, you've scared him all the same."

Megan looked at the floor then gazed at the clock.

"I have to pick up the kids," she said.

He hoisted himself out of the chair and moved out of her office. Megan, bulging briefcase in hand, closed the door.

"It's hard, you know."

"Single motherhood?" he asked sympathetically.

"That too," she replied.