

## The Professor of Desire

I was a balding, married English teacher. With their doleful eyes and their after-hours visits, my female students stirred something in me that I should have ignored. By Sam Kashner

I can't say they didn't warn me. There's a professor, a medievalist at the College of William & Mary. He cares about two things: himself and baseball. He's a tall guy with a craggy face who looks like Tommy Lee Jones. He's catnip for female students; he married one of them. Her father used to run a major corporation. Some guys just can't lose. He told me a perhaps apocryphal story about a female freshman at the college who had an independent project—she was going to sleep with every male professor in the department in which she majored. It took her three years. She supposedly graduated with honors. She's become an icon, a name you hear when you first come to this place, along with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

But first you need to know how I got here. That's the part of the story that's so difficult to tell. I want to explain how I fell into this moral mesh pit, and yet I want to protect my wife from gossip and scandal. But like it or not, we were in this thing together.

I was an English teacher at William & Mary. One day a few years ago, I read to my undergraduates from Keats's poem "The Eve of St. Agnes." *Sid's in the paradise, and so remained, / Raptures guard upon her empty dream, / And hush'd to her breathing, if it chanced / To wake into a phantasmal undertone...* Talk about an existential fallacy—I'm no Keats, I'm no Lord Byron. But we had become fast. After class that day, one of my students hung back, waiting until everyone left the room. She looked upset. She said, "Professor Kashner, I have something to tell you."

I said, "How can I help you, Sophie?"

She said, "I love it when you read to us. I love your voice. It makes me want to tell all my boyfriends."

I think I said, "Thank you, but it's not me. It's the poem talking."

I clapped two censors together and tried to hide behind the chalk dust. I wasn't even sure what she meant by "want." No woman, no girl, had ever said that to me before. At that



moment, I knew what teaching in college was all about. It was the reverse of the needle.

They came to college loaded for bear, these young women who had gone hunting with their fathers, who came from the horse country of Charlottesville or Gloucester, Virginia, where they came up out of the sea. They know how to cut out a deer's heart and gut a fish. To them, I was the most sensitive man in the world. But I was a whimp, a moral coward who had learned nothing from literature.

I knew there were signals, certain things to watch out for: The telephone was their main instrument of romance. They would call, usually late or after supper, wanting to make an appointment "to go over their work." They would talk about how

My name has been changed except that of my wife.

much trouble they were having with the assignment and say they needed help badly—they were desperate for help, but instead of talking about their papers they would tell you about their dreams. “I was losing you, and my boyfriend was there. It was on the stairs, and he saw us, but I didn’t care. Isn’t that terrible?” Oh “I had a dream I was in bed with your wife, and you came home and we both had you. We were devoting you. Isn’t that awful?”

One evening a student—a girl who was always cheery and cheerful—asked to see me. She showed up in my office on the top floor of Tucker Hall wearing a leather jacket over her nightgown. When she took off her jacket, the light from the halogen lamp turned her nightgown into a pane of glass. I felt like Ray Milland in *X—The Man With X-Ray Eyes*. No matter where I looked, I saw naked women. I tried to send her home, but she was eager to talk. She said she was raised as a Baptist and this essay she had written for the class dealt with that, and then ever since she had transferred from a Bible college she just wanted to have a lot of sex. But one topic was omitted: the topic that hung over our heads like a pirate—her standing there in her see-through nightgown. It was an ordeal. How did I come to this sorry pass? All of a sudden, I felt like a desecrated man, someone who had been reborn into a treacherous new life.

Soon after she waded into my hot tub, Andrea showed up in my office one night, looking like Leslie Caron.

SARACI AND I had been married only a couple of weeks when she got the news. She was going to be the writer in residence at William & Mary. It was a one-year appointment. She promised me we wouldn’t stay a day longer. It’s been eight years. She has tenure.

After a period of pleasant loafing, I became bored. My life filled with ennui. I took up group therapy, but the therapists accused me of manipulating the maternal instincts of the other patients, all of whom were women. Fortunately, I got a phone call. It was from the chairman of the English department. They needed someone besides Saraci to teach English and creative writing. It was an adjunct position, which means, he explained, no benefits and virtually no money. I took the job. It was the best offer I’d had in three years. I didn’t know it was going to kill me. And then I remembered a poet who was all the rage when I was in college. He had just published a book of his verse. Most of the women I knew in school loved it. He had a reputation as someone who slept with a lot of his female students. He came to my college in New York and taught there for one semester. I was in his class. He seemed to live out of his car. One morning I saw him slithering out of a girl’s dorm in his underwear to get something from the trunk of his car.

It was *The Collected Poems of H.C. Yarn*. I thought, This guy is getting more pussy than Frank Sinatra. That’s when I decided to become a poet.

It doesn’t take much for them to fall in love with you. As a



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professor of creative writing, you tend to get the dreamers, the romantics, the weirdos. Spend twenty minutes talking about young Keats—his lungs filling up with fluid, his love letters to Fanny Brawne—there that drawing of the young poet on his deathbed in Rome, and it's shooting fish in a barrel.

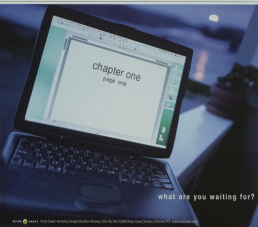
I gradually started to feel more comfortable standing in front of the classroom. I learned to walk backward toward the blackboard so my bald spot wouldn't show. I bought a NordicTrack and lost the rumen that had endeared me to my wife. Something was happening to me. It wasn't Keats, and it certainly wasn't teaching the art of the sonnet. It was the day Claudia popped the seal out of her tongue and started twisting it around in her mouth—and she was the best writer in the class. That was the day I got religion. The delicate architecture of her young face, the sage or nape of her neck, became my church.

We didn't have sex, but she introduced me to her little band of friends: Stephanie, Sophie, Jamie and Laurie. Most of them were gay. Claudia had turned so the year of my undoing. Claudia was the ringleader. She had a thing for Morrissey. I didn't know who the hell Morrissey was. Stephanie tried to explain it to me. I felt as if Stephanie had become my mirror and I had undergone some kind of generational stroke. I was suffering from cultural aphasia. All my references were off. None of my students listened to Bob Dylan. They didn't have to—many were named Dylan.

I gave them writing assignments. Whatever the assignment was, they would often write about sex. I had to discuss their

work with them in student conferences. Someone told me to keep my office door open—always. Needing to learn more, I asked them to find time to write about sex on campus. One student conducted an oral history of the first time her friends had sex. She read it out loud in class in a thin, melancholy voice. Most of the boys squirmed. The girls seemed comfortable with the material; it was simply anecdotal evidence of what they already knew to be true. For me, it was the Book of Revelation. I was stunned. I started to sweat. I knew some of the people she was writing about. I felt like a voyeur. "The first time I had sex," she read.

It was with a boy named Jim. He was 17 and I was 17 and we were at a party at my friend's house. There were two people in eighth grade having sex upstairs in the bedroom and we all went and batted in on them and climbed into bed with them when they were both bare-naked. Jim and I had been going out for awhile. He went to public school by the way. We had sex and it didn't last very long. He told me I had to get out of bed afterwards because he wanted to have sex again but I couldn't be in the same room with him because his refractory period was too long. So I went and plucked my eyebrows with my friend who was also at the party—Then I kept having sex with other people after Jim when I went to college—Sex didn't mean much to me by then. But then I started having sex with Jim three times a day for two years. It was really good except for his penis, which sometimes was just too big. I don't care about him anymore.



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what are you waiting for?



It was phone sex without the long distance charges. It was scary. Most of their sex had gone on in high school. By the time they got to college, sex bored them. They were reading comic books in bed. I was married. I was in love with my wife. But the wing of madness was about to pass over me.

I met Stephanie at the Prince George Coffee Shoppe; she gave me something Claudia had written. She warned my opinion of it.

He told me if I wanted to I could have sex with anyone. He says I don't try. He told me to fuck a professor. He made a bet with me. I've never really tried to seduce a professor but I'm going to. I'm a senior so I don't have much time. Probably a philosophy professor. I think they would be really good in bed.

Last year I studied in France. We dated older men, much older. But we never fucked them. They just took us to really amazing parties with lots of fine alcohol and people who were much better than us.

Once a professor tried to sleep with me, at least I think he did. We were at a bar. He bought me drinks all night and told me I looked older than 20. (It was really only so but that's not what my I.D. said.) He asked me for a ride home, but he was staying next door to the bar. So we got in my car and drove around for hours, talking.

He wanted me to find a beach. I knew where one was but pretended not to. I dropped him off and he tried to kiss me. I turned my head. I almost did it. I almost did it because he told me I could be a writer. But he was old and not very good looking and I think he was married—I didn't talk to him after that but three months later he sent me his book. I haven't read it yet and it's been a year.

Stephanie asked me what I thought. I talked about it as though it were an AP wire story about the impact of scallop dredging on the tidewater. But it was a thing of beauty I talked Stephanie into letting me take it home. That night, I thought about early retirement.

I know other teachers here. Some of them have married their students. For the most part, these seemed to be good marriages. At least they've found someone who cares about geology or "The Wife of Bath's Tale" or the Greek language as much as they do. Maybe that's a good thing. But mostly it's the story of a bookworm emerging from his chrysalis only to be squashed by an Alanis Morissette fan in Belknapco.

Laurie is no longer Claudia's friend. I don't know what happened. Laurie went to bed with one of the younger members of the faculty. She thought he was a jerk but slept with him to get back at her boyfriend, who was having sex with another young woman in the class. I was their teacher—I shouldn't have been interested in whom they were sleeping with. But I was. It was all I cared about. It was a school for scandal, and they were performing for an audience of one.

I HAD NEVER been a devious man, at least not until I met her. My fascination with Claudia and her friends occurred at a kind of distance. In the thin, chilling air of a college autumn, these young girls brought me to life—but with a kind of desperation.

But Andrea wasn't one of Claudia's little band of sisters, who had begun to seem interchangeable to me. Andrea was a senior. She had dark eyes and long brown hair. I started running into her at the Green Leaf, the college hangout where all the student-teacher intrigue seemed to take place. Pretty soon those chance meetings started to seem planned. It wasn't long before I was hooked.

It was at the Green Leaf that I developed my talent for intrigue. Through the most casual questions, I learned that Andrea came from a very small, close-knit community in southwestern Virginia. She talked about her senior year in high school, which had marked the beginning of a string of student deaths that lasted for about a year and a half. One was a car crash, one was cancer, two were suicides, and one student died in class of heart failure.

My troubles really began the night she and her friend Claire had a little too much to drink and called me up. They talked on the phone about sex travel and reformation. Nancy was teaching her evening class, so I knew she wouldn't be back until nine or 10 p.m. I must have been out of my mind when I invited them to come over to the house. Claire begged off, but Andrea showed up, wearing a light, cottony dress—this was the beginning of the spring semester, and it was still cool in the evenings. She joined me out back on our deck facing the woods, and I asked her if she was getting cold. She said yes, and then climbed into our hot tub in her summer dress. I'll never forget it. I made a couple of vodka tonics and joined her. We stayed in that hot tub for about an hour. When she left, I did a cartwheel for her in the grass. The next thing I knew, we were smoking off and having picnics together, with strawberries, in the back of her pickup truck.

A week after she waded into my hot tub, Andrea showed up one night in my office, looking like Linda Carter—in other words, like a beautiful French chipmunk. The building was empty. Suddenly, she was clinging to me like one who had come close to drowning. Her hands moved down my chest, and her breathing grew louder in my ear. Her body practically crushed against me. I rolled her toward the wall. She said she had never done this before, and her hands went up as if she were about to crawl toward the ceiling, pounding the wall as if searching for some secret passageway. I lifted her sweater a little and saw the tag at the back of her neck: 100% VIRGIN WOOL. With my hand on her stomach, I felt a tremor move through her—it was shivering and leathery at the same time. The air had become heavy with sex and all its sorrows.

I went on seeing her for seven months. I thought I was pretty secure in my personal life. I was wrong. Andrea had become a physical necessity, like those romances that can be attributed to the strain of wariness. Once, I had to take Nancy to the hospital for a migraine, and in the waiting room I called Andrea and talked with her roommate while Nancy registered with the emergency-room nurse. I was having a moral blackout.



Penny thing was, Nancy and I were completely totally compatible. We were happy in each other's company and went, of course, very much in love.

It was only after I had sex with Andrea in her dorm room that she almost casually handed me a photograph of herself on her wedding day. This was news. Not only was Andrea my student but she was also married.

She had married a kid from her hometown. She said he was in the service, stationed far away, and they had been high school sweethearts and had gotten married when she was 17. They had one daughter near a Civil War monument in Fredericksburg, and then another, and then he proposed to her. He played folk guitar but had a maraudous temper.

Andrea's husband, Earl, learned about the affair. Andrea thinks her friend Claire might have written him a letter during Christmas break. Someone told her she stopped eating. Earl accused his wife of "kissing him up here in the [rectory]" and said he was going to "come to the college and beat it up." He told Andrea he had spoken to a priest and the priest had said it was the right thing to do.

I was probably one of the people he had been taught to look up to. I was a professor. I was educated. But I was really a great, characterless fraud. When my car broke down on the way to class one morning, I kicked the tire so hard it brought tears to my eyes. It was the only way I could bring myself to cry. By the end of the spring term, Andrea came to warn me. I didn't know what to expect. I began sitting at home with the blinds drawn. Andrea told me he had once gotten as mad at her he had taken a buzz saw to all the trees in their backyard. He had become a legend on the base for eating his commanding officer's bat. Nancy kept asking me why I was "sitting at home like a monk."

Some month—the playboy month of Williamsburg.

I always heard the dead *delicia* gossip. That's too bad, because that's all I was left with when Andrea's husband hanged himself in the shower, right there on the base. He left a note in one of his running shoes. He wrote he was sorry he couldn't leave Andrea a lot of money. He wrote that because of me, because I couldn't "believe myself" around my students, he would never be able to take his wife in his arms again and kiss her. There was a PS. It said that if his family wanted to know what made him do this awful thing, they should blame the professor. My address and phone number were the last things Earl ever wrote.

After that, students stopped coming to see me on their own or spending time with me after class. I had become a pariah on campus. And not just on campus. For the next two months, I lived at a motor court. Eventually, Nancy took me back.

And then, about two weeks after I'd moved back home, Andrea came to our door in the middle of the night wanting to talk to me. Nancy was asleep. Andrea was wearing a kind of blue kimono. She looked so tiny sitting in that big green chair. Nancy's mother had brought us an anniversary present. I asked her if she wanted a Coke, but I fixed her a real drink, bourbon on the rocks. At least she wasn't trembling anymore. She confessed she loved me, but that didn't come as a surprise. A man knows these things.

I tried to comfort Andrea, but I was acting. I was just thinking

about myself. I was wondering if I was the only one who could hear Nancy's breathing in our bed getting quieter.

The relationship ended quickly, by the way. The guilt and the scandal were too much for everyone to bear. Earlier, I had thought of Andrea constantly, now she had simply become a source of disturbance. We saw each other about once a week. I could never bring myself to tell her I loved her. I had never said that to anyone except my wife.

The relationship was over. Nancy was a much more exciting lover. Andrea was about *firma* desire, not about sex.

I want to tell the truth, sparing no one. Perhaps it will show in my face and in my actions and people will feel that my punishment, though self-imposed, is just. I think I turned out to be a good teacher, even though for a long time I was two men: a husband in love with his wife and a man bewitched. Andrea simply brought the two men together. One lived with his wife in a beautiful house that looks out over the Virginia woods, and the other entered a dangerous age and sat drinking and flirting with women young enough to be his daughters. But make no mistake about it. Of these two men I had become, one is dead.

Every summer near year's bumper crop of freshmen comes through the college—most of them accompanied by their parents. I wonder if they have any idea that in a few short months their sons and daughters will be sexual libertines. I know all the jokes about an aging man and a young girl. I don't think they're funny anymore. There are a few hundred women who are about to enter my life, who don't really have far to look to find a dangerous age. I remember one of them telling me "aj isn't so old." She was trying to make me feel better. I told her she reminded me of Beethoven's death mask. I meant it as a compliment.

So you sit at your desk waiting for them to breeze into your office and sit with their tender knees nudged under them. Sometimes on cold days, they even bring you a hot chocolate, but you can't tell them it'll take more than that to give warmth where there is now a chill. Sometimes I watch them from my office window as one of the seniors leads them around on a campus tour. I look out and see these fleeing beauties, these new temptations, and I think: Who will protect me from them? More to the point, who will protect me from myself?

I lived in a world of books. I learned noble speeches and studied the footprints of great writers, but I got lost. I had wandered off the reservation of beautiful words into the forest that I was a great man, living above the agony I had caused. I used to teach Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, now I'm making one. I heard the chain of my mortality clanking, and that was all I heard. It made me deaf to the world. More important, it made me deaf to the sound of my wife's voice—my beautiful wife—calling me home.

Sam Kasher is the author of *Strawland*, published in paperback in May by Scribner.

