

Stanford: Season Finale

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June 3

Nobody likes being called to the principal's office. Even in high school when the principal was "cool" — I'd tell him school was harmful and should be abolished, he'd agree, and we'd talk about it — it still felt wrong. And it always felt worse when, as surprisingly often was the case, the powerful man in the big chair talked about how powerful you, the puny little pushed-around student, were.

I remember the time in 7th grade that the teacher told me to leave the room and fill out one of his "dispute resolution forms" — his method of classroom discipline. I resisted by filling out the form in an absurd manner, because the whole thing was just so degrading. Then the teacher complained that *I* was being condescending! (A few years later, after the 7th grade teacher had moved out to a cabin in the Pacific Northwest with my 6th grade teacher, he came back to school and seemed much cooler, so I don't think it was really his fault.)

*You sure weren't rich, didn't live in the city
Didn't whisper sweet nothings, never told me I'm pretty*

All this by way of saying I received a rather discomfiting feeling when [unnamed authority figure] sent me a cryptic note saying she wanted me to come see her. I asked her about what but she never replied. (She later explained that she meant to but it just got behind.)

Worried, I asked a few people about what [unnamed authority figure] did. "Have you committed any crimes recently?" asked one. "Not that I know of," I said. "Maybe I kill people in my sleep?" But how do I dispose of the bodies? The lake's already run dry! Another, always optimistic, insisted it must be a good thing. "They wouldn't have her deliver bad news. It can only be good." I wasn't buying it.

As I walked to the meeting, there was a different disposition. I heard a girl screaming her lungs out and then slapping her boyfriend, who had apparently cheated on her. The boyfriend was desperately penitent, insisting it was just an accident, not a pattern, and that he loved her.

*You cheated at cards, and lied when you hung out
in bars making time with those girls you called old pals*

None of this eased my discomfort, nor did the fact that I had a major assignment due in a couple hours. 90% of my grade in one class depended on what work I turned in today by 5pm and I hadn't really started on it. I tried to do it

last night but I couldn't bring myself to do it until I was too tired to make any progress. I wasn't sure I'd have any better luck this morning.

When I finally saw [unnamed authority figure] she was so happy that I couldn't stop myself from smiling. Maybe she was right — maybe it was good news. Then we sat down. "I wanted to talk to you about some of your behavior," she began. Oh, this wasn't going to be good.

*I cried when you left me,
now I'm wondering when you'll make it all up to me?*

She said she'd been tipped off by my IHUM TF, which was odd, since we'd just had a long talk a week ago or so and I thought we'd worked everything out. Not that there really was a whole lot to work out. Actually, that talk probably just made it worse.

But then she'd done her own research and begun telling me what she'd uncovered:

- She'd pulled my admissions applications and saw that I was really self-schooled, meaning I was probably "a bit more isolated or sheltered from your peers than might be typical."
- She checked with the Residence Dean at my dorm and found [I was too shy to ask someone for help moving a filing cabinet](#).
- She also heard (amazingly) that I'd [written some hurtful things](#) about a "young woman I was dating".
- The TF had said that I once blurted something out in class, which I don't really remember specifically but certainly seems plausible.
- The TF also claimed that once I had jumped out at her and said boo.
- The TF also said that I'd once said she went to a lower-class school and suggested I was trying to call her authority into question.

"It paints an interesting picture for me," she said. I laughed to myself. "Heh, it's just like one of those television season finales, you know, where the main characters get called before an authority figure who then proceeds to list everything they've done over the season, only it's all a little off and a little out-of-context." Like that *Seinfeld* finale, where everyone they'd ever met started to testify against them. (See how I self-consciously point out the clichés I'm in? Let it never be said that this blog is not post-modern!)

It certainly was an interesting picture. I was beginning to sound sort of autistic or something. "I feel like I've made a couple mistakes," I said, "but doesn't everyone? The difference is that mine are just a little more public and mine are the ones being scrutinized." If reality TV has taught us anything, it's that you can find something in anything, if you look hard enough.

*Don't I have the right to be over you yet?
I've tried pretending. I tried to forget.*

We kept talking — for a half-hour altogether — but every time I tried to tell her about myself it just kept sounding worse. The facts were all able to fit the frame.

“Well, what suggestions do you have?” I finally asked. “One strange thing about me is that I love hearing negative things about myself.” “You do?” she replied. “Yeah, I guess most people, when they receive nasty letters, they feel bad or something. But I love them — the nastier the better. the ones that are all obscentities just make my day.”

“Why?” she asked. “I don’t know,” I said and thought about it. “There’s this theory,” I said, “that’s very popular in our society that people have certain specific attributes, like personality traits. So some people are smart and other people are funny and that’s just how it is.”

“I don’t believe that. I think people are malleable. I think I’m malleable. So whe I hear something negative, I don’t think ‘oh no, I’m a bad person’, I think ‘well, that’s something I can work on.’” She didn’t seem convinced.

Well, she didn’t want to punish me or anything, she said, and she didn’t know me well enough to give any specific advice, but she suggested I talk to my friends (I tried to persuade her that I had some) and ask them about my “outbursts” and “empathy”.

*Though it's past three AM, I would still let you in
'cause I can't go on dreaming alone.*

I couldn’t find anything to take to lunch to read, which is generally a sign I’ll find someone to talk to. And sure enough I found one of those friends and sat down. “Do you think I have problems with empathy?” I asked him. “Uhhh, I don’t know,” he said. “Why?” I told him the story. “Heh, that’s pretty funny,” he said. “You got called to the principal’s office for hurting someone’s feelings.”

Afterwards, when my friend has left and I’m all alone, a hand grabs my shoulder. I spin around but I don’t recognize its owner. “Hey, Schwartz, I’m really sorry you didn’t win evil dictator last night,” he says. “Uh-huh,” I mumble. “I voted for you,” he says. “Oh. Thank you,” I say and walk away. After a few seconds I realize what he’s referring to — the dorm passed out surveys for things like “funniest guy” and so on and announced the results in a *Family Feud*-style gameshow last night. Maybe I have more friends than I think.