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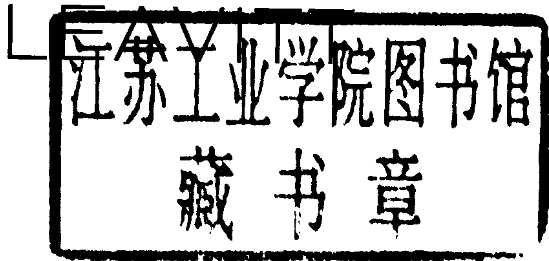

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FOR MARK
AND TOLO

A little dog revolving round a spindle

Gives rise to harmonies beyond belief,
A cast of stars. . . . Is there in Victor's heart
No honey for the vanquished? Art is art.
The life it asks of us is a dog's life.

—James Merrill, "The Victor Dog"

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Martin Bauman;

or, A Sure Thing

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1

FLINT'S FIRST PRINCIPLE

I FIRST MET Stanley Flint in the winter of 1980, when I was nineteen. He was between editorial greatnesses then, just fired by the famous magazine but not yet hired by the famous publisher. To earn his keep he traveled from university to university, offering his famous Seminar on the Writing of Fiction, which took place one night a week and lasted for four hours. Wild rumors circulated about this seminar. It was said that at the beginning of the term he made his students write down their deepest, darkest, dirtiest secrets and then read them aloud one by one. It was said that he asked if they would be willing to give up a limb in order to write a line as good as the opening of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It was said that he carried a pistol and shot it off every time a student read what he considered to be a formidable sentence.

As the former fiction editor of *Broadway* magazine, Flint was already notorious in those days, though his notoriety was of an oddly secondary variety, the result of his having published, during his tenure there, the first stories of some writers who had gone on to become great—so great, in fact, that their blazing aureoles shone backwards, as it were, illuminating the face of Flint the Discoverer, Flint the Seer, who had had the acumen not only to recognize genius in its rawest form, but to pluck it from the heap, nurture it, refine it. Soon he had such a reputation that it was claimed he needed only to make a phone call and a writer would have a publishing contract, just like that—until the editor in chief of *Broadway*, either from jealousy or because Flint

had had an affair with his secretary (it depended who you asked), fired him. Much media uproar followed but no job offers, and Flint went to work as a teacher, in which role he cultivated an aura of mystic authority; for instance, he was supposed to have gotten one of his students a six-figure advance on the basis of a single paragraph, which was probably the real reason why three hundred people had applied for the fifteen places in his class.

I remember vividly the room in which that seminar took place. Located just off the informal library of one of the dormitories, it was oblong and narrow, with wheezing radiators and shelves full of books too obscure or valueless even to bother cataloguing. On the chalkboard—left over from an Italian class that had met earlier in the day—the conjugation of the verb *mangiare* was written in a tidy hand. Because I had arrived twenty minutes early the first evening, only one other person was seated at the battered oak table, a girl with circular glasses and tight blond braids, her attention scowlingly focused on some German worksheets. Not wanting to appear idle in the presence of such industry, I busied myself arranging my coat and scarves over the back of a chair (it was January), then, pulling a book at random from one of the shelves, sat down and started to read it. The book was called *Dawn to Sunset*, and it had been published in 1904. On the title page its author had written the following inscription: "*Con molto affetto*, from one who spent his formative years 'neath thy Ivied walls, James Egbert Hillman, '89. Sorrento."

"*Florence!*" the first chapter began.

> Flinging open the curtains, Dick Dandridge stared wonderingly at the piazza in morning light. Such a buzz of activity! It was market day, and at little stalls old women in black dresses were selling apples and potatoes. Two horses with caps on their ears pulled a wine cart past the picturesque medieval church. *Italy*, Dick thought, remembering, for a moment, his mother weeping as his ship set sail from New York, and then his adventures in London, in Paris, at the customs house in Chiasso. He could not wait to get out into it, and pulling his nightshirt over his head, he called out to his friend Thornley, "Get up, slug-a-bed! We've Florence to see!"

A Hispanic girl with bangs and acne on her forehead now came in and took a seat; then a pair of boys, in avid conversation; then a boy with a withered arm whom I recognized from a class on modern poetry the semester before. We saluted each other vaguely. The girl with the braids and the big glasses put away her worksheets.

A conversation started. Over the voices of Dick Dandridge and his friend Thornley, one of the pair of boys said, "I wasn't on the list, but I'm hoping he'll let me in anyway." (At this last remark I smiled privately. Though only a sophomore, I *was* on the list.) The boy who had said this, I observed, was handsome, older than I, with wire-rimmed spectacles and a two-days' growth of beard; it pleased me to think that Stanley Flint had preferred my submission to his. And meanwhile every seat but one had been taken; students were sitting on the floor, sitting on their backpacks, leaning against the shelves.

Then Stanley Flint himself strode through the door, and all conversation ceased. There was no mistaking him. Tall and limping, with wild dark hair and a careful, gray-edged beard, he carried a whiff of New York into the room, a scent of steam rising through subway grates which made me shudder with longing. Bearing a wine-colored leather briefcase with brass locks, dressed in a gray suit, striped tie, and fawn trench coat that, as he sat down, he took off and flung dramatically over the back of his chair, he seemed the embodiment of all things remote and glamorous, an urban adulthood to which I aspired but had not the slightest idea how to reach. Even his polished cane, even his limp—like everything about Flint, its origins were a source of speculation and wild stories—spoke to me of worldliness and glamour and the illicit.

He did not greet us. Instead, opening his briefcase, he took out a yellow legal pad, a red pencil, and a copy of the list of students he had accepted for the seminar. "Which one of you is Lopez?" he asked, scanning the list. "You?" (He was looking at the girl with bangs and bad skin.)

"No, I'm Joyce Mittman," the girl said.

"Then *you* must be Lopez." (This time he addressed her neighbor, another Hispanic girl, her hair cut short like a swimmer's.)

"No, I'm Acosta," the neighbor said.

A low murmur of laughter now circulated—one in which Flint's raspy baritone did not take part. Looking up, he settled his gaze on a tall, elegant young woman in a cowl-neck sweater who was standing in the corner. She was the only other Hispanic in the room.

"Then *you* must be Lopez," he said triumphantly.

The girl did not smile. "Did you get my note?" she asked.

"Did you bring the story?" he answered.

She nodded.

"Over here, over here." Flint tapped the table.

Extracting some pages from her backpack, Lopez walked to the front of the room and handed them over. Flint put on a pair of tortoiseshell half-glasses. He read.

After less than half a minute, he put the pages down.

"No, no, I'm sorry," he said, giving them back to her. "This is crap. You will never be a writer. Please leave."

"But you've only—"

"Please leave."

Lopez wheezed. A sort of rictus seemed to have seized her—and not only her, but me, the other students, the room itself. In the high tension of the moment, no one moved or made a sound, except for Flint, who scribbled blithely on his legal pad. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

The question broke the spell, unpalsied poor Lopez, who stuffed the crumpled pages into her backpack and made for the door, slamming it behind her as she went.

"In case you were wondering what happened," Flint said, continuing to scribble, "Miss Lopez sent me a note requesting that I look at her story tonight, as she had missed the submission deadline. I agreed to do so. Unfortunately I did not think the story to be worthy." Gazing up from his pad, he counted with his index finger. "And now I see that there are twenty—twenty-two people in this room. As I recall I selected only fifteen students for the class. I would appreciate it if those of you whose names were not on the list would please leave now, quietly, and without creating a spectacle of the sort that we have just witnessed from Miss Lopez."

Several people bolted. Again Flint counted. Nineteen of us remained.

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"I should tell you now," Flint said, "that the stories you submitted, to a one, were shit, though those written by the fifteen of you whom I selected at least showed conviction—a wisp of truth here or there. As for the rest, you are courageous to have stuck it out, I'll give you that, and as courage is the one virtue every fiction writer must possess in spades, I shall let you stay—that is, if you still feel inclined after I tell you what I expect of you."

Then he stood and began to speak. He spoke for two hours.

So began life with Stanley Flint. I'm sorry to say I don't remember much of what he said that evening, though I do retain a general impression of being stirred, even awed; he was a marvelous raconteur, and could keep us rapt all evening with his monologues, which often ranged far afield from the topic at hand. Indeed, today I regret that unlike the girl with the braids—her name, I soon learned, was Baylor—I never took notes during class. Otherwise I'd have before me a detailed record of what Flint had to tell us those nights, rather than merely the memory of a vague effulgence out of the haze of which an aphorism occasionally emerges, fresh and entire. For instance: "The greatest sin you can commit as a writer is to put yourself in a position of moral superiority to your characters." (Though I have never ceased to trumpet this rule, I have often broken it.) Or: "People forgive genius everything except success." Or: "Remember that when you ask someone to read a story you've written, you're asking that person to give you a piece of his life. Minutes—hours—of his life." (The gist of this idea was expressed by "Flint's first principle," of which Flint's first principle was exemplary: "Get on with it!")

It was all a great change from the only other writing class I'd ever taken, a summer poetry workshop sponsored by the Seattle junior college—a remnant of sixties idealism, all pine trees and octagons—where my mother had once gone to hear lectures on Proust. Of this workshop (the word in itself is revealing) I was the only male member. Our teacher, a young woman whose watery blond hair reached nearly to her knees, imparted to the proceedings the mildewy perfume of group therapy, at once confessional and pious. Often class was held outdoors, on a lawn spattered with pine needles, which is perhaps why my memory has subsequently condensed that entire series of afternoons into the singular image of one of my classmates, a heavy girl

with red spectacle-welts on her nose, standing before us in the sunlight and reading a poem of which only one line—"the yellow flows from me, a river"—remains, the words themselves flowing from her sad mouth in a repetitive drone, like a river without source or end.

Flint's seminar, to say the least, had a different rhythm. It worked like this: at the beginning of each session a student would be asked to read aloud from his or her work. The student would then read one sentence. If Flint liked the sentence, the student would be allowed to continue; if he did not, however—and this was much more common—the student would be cut off, shut up, sent to the corner. A torrent of eloquence would follow, the ineffectuality of this slight undergraduate effort providing an occasion for Flint to hold forth dazzlingly, and about anything at all. His most common complaint was that the sentence amounted to "baby talk" or "throat-clearing"—this latter accusation almost invariably followed by the invocation "Remember Flint's first principle!" and from us, the responsorial chant, "Get on with it!"

Soon we understood that Flint loathed "boyfriend stories," stories in which the protagonist was a writer, stories set in restaurants or cocktail lounges. To cocktail lounges he showed a particular aversion: any story set in a cocktail lounge would provoke from him a wail of lamentation, delivered in a voice both stentorian and grave, a sermonizer's voice, for the truth was, there was something deeply ministerial about Flint. Meanwhile the student whose timid words had provoked this outpouring would have no choice but to sit and percolate, humiliated, occasionally letting out little gasps of self-defense, which Flint would immediately quash. An atmosphere of hyperventilation ensued. The windows steamed. Those Flint had maligned stared at him, choking on the sentences in which, a moment earlier, they had taken such pride, and which he was now shoving back down their throats.

Yet when, on occasion, he did like a sentence—or even more rarely, when he allowed a student to move from the first sentence to the second, or from the second to the third—it was as if a window had been thrown open, admitting a breath of air into the churning humidity of that room, and yet a breath that would cool the face of the chosen student only, bathing him or her in the delightful breeze of laudation, while outside its influence the rest of us sweltered, wiping our noses,

mopping our brows. Sometimes he even let his favorites—of whom Baylor, the girl with the braids, soon became the exemplar—read a story all the way to the end. On these occasions the extravagance of Flint's praise more than matched the barbarity of his deprecation. Not content merely to pay homage, he would seem actually to bow down before the author, assuming the humble posture of a supplicant. "I'm honored," he'd say, "I'm moved," while the student in question glanced away, embarrassed. We all knew that his adulation, at such moments, was over the top—a reflection, perhaps, of the depth to which his passions ran, or else part of a strategy intended to make us feel as if his approval were something on which our very lives depended.

Still, he was nothing if not consistent. Whether delivering tirade or paean, he never wavered from his literary ethos, at the core of which lay the belief that all human experiences, no matter how different they might seem on the surface, shared a common grounding. This theme ("Flint's second principle") he trumpeted at every opportunity. To perceive something one had gone through as particular or special, he kept telling us, was to commit not merely an error, but a sin against art. On the other hand, by admitting the commonality that binds us all, not only might we win from readers the precious tremor of empathy that precedes faith, we might also near, as we could from no other direction, that mercurial yet unwavering goal: the truth.

In retrospect, I wonder at my ability not only to survive, but to thrive under such circumstances. Twenty years later I'm more sensitive rather than less, more cowardly, less likely to consider the ordeal of Flint's criticism worth enduring. I feel sympathetic toward poor Lopez in a way that I didn't then. Also, so many people have studied with Flint since 1980 that by now his detractors far outnumber his supporters, among whom—with some reservations—I count myself. According to these detractors, Flint was nothing but a bully, a petty dictator, his classes the ritual induction ceremonies of the cult over which he presided, like a fat little demigod. For what, after all, was this alternation of upbraiding with intemperate homage that he practiced, if not the very essence of brainwashing? Yes, to his detractors Flint would never be more than a mountebank, a literary equivalent of Werner Er-

hard, the self-help guru who in the late seventies stripped his would-be disciples of their wristwatches and forbade them to go to the bathroom. Nor can I deny the legitimacy of their complaints, for he did all the things of which they accuse him. And yet—how else to say it?—he was great. And if greatness, these days, arouses suspicion, if not outright hostility, simply by making itself felt, perhaps this is because great men and women are rarely nice, and often capricious; or because something in the very nature of democracy chafes at the idea of too much greatness residing within a single human frame, instead of being placed at the center of the arena to be fought over; or because greatness demands of us that we reconsider, and possibly revise, the very terms according to which we define our humanity—a task from which mediocrity, by its very nature, cowers. His detractors are right to describe Stanley Flint as the leader of a cult. They are wrong in assuming that it was a cult of personality. If Flint was a missionary, then literature was his deity. "You'll never meet anyone who takes writing more seriously than I do," he told me once. He was right. I never have. Of himself, on the other hand, I am convinced that he thought very little.

This became more and more obvious as the semester proceeded. The third week, for instance, he arrived in class red-faced and winded, wearing black boots and a Heathcliffish cape. "Children," he said, limping to the table and opening his briefcase, "I have a special treat for you tonight," then went on to explain that he had just received some pages from the novel on which Leonard Trask—the great writer he had discovered a decade ago, when Trask was still a mineworker in Montana—had been at work for the past ten years. And these pages, for our delight as well as our edification, he was now going to read aloud to us, a rare privilege, as even Trask's publisher had not yet seen them.

I remember wondering, that night, at Flint's cape. Certainly it contributed to the element of theatricality that underlay his performance, a quality of spectacle with which Flint invested all his readings, but particularly those of the writers he had discovered, or whose work he revered. Diction precise, voice rapturous, he offered us Trask's finely tuned sentences as if each were a delicacy, a slice of white truffle, or a

toast point spread with caviar. Indeed, so sumptuous was his delivery that today I recall nothing of the reading itself. Instead it is only the voice of the caped orator that resonates, a voice so charismatic that it seemed to eclipse everything around it: our faces, the snow outside the window, even the novel-forever-in-progress that had occasioned it.

Another recollection: one particularly cold, blizzardy night, Flint brought in a copy of some literary quarterly—I forget which one—and thrust it in front of our faces. "Do you know this magazine?" he asked, pointing at the matte white cover, which was already smudged with fingerprint-shaped patches of *New York Times* ink.

We did not.

"I'm going to read you a story I've had occasion to see here recently," Flint went on, "because I want to know, honestly, what you think of it." And he began to read. One sentence, two sentences. He stopped. "No, no," he said, shaking his head. "All wrong. No life. Take this as a lesson, children. The language is being mangled, not caressed. And this sort of thing appears all the time in our better literary journals."

We stayed silent. Clearing his throat, he read another sentence—and stopped again. "You see?" he said. "It is in your eyes. The story has failed to captivate. It has failed to seduce. I wrote this," he added casually, slipping the magazine back into his briefcase as a rattle of surprise passed through the room. For up until that moment, we had not known that Flint himself was a writer.

The next morning, I looked up his name in the periodicals index at the library. It turned out that he had published a dozen stories over the past decade, all of them in obscure journals with tiny print runs, none in the great organs of culture in which the work of his disciples regularly appeared. Of the stories themselves—all of which I dug out and read—I remember few details. Most of them were not even stories so much as brief bits of language torture, congested, constipated even, and redolent of some long and futile labor—as if the sentences had been subjected to such anguished revision, worked over so many times, that they had finally expired from the effort. Then, for the first time, I felt that I understood Stanley Flint. Far from some disinterested nurturer, he was a literary Tantalus, from whose dry and reach-

ing lips that flow of eloquence, a single taste of which would have satiated him, forever bent away. Yes, his was the cruel position of the high priest who finds himself envying the very God it is his sacred duty to cultivate; and yet who can say whether this envy is not itself intended to be the ultimate test of his faith?

Although in memory those hours I spent under Flint's tutelage have now bloated to the point that they seem to obliterate everything else I did and thought that semester, the truth is that every day except Wednesday (when the seminar met) I was leading the typically desultory life of the undergraduate, in which Flint played no part; that is to say, I went to class, I studied, I brooded over futile crushes, I ate my dinners and breakfasts in the dining hall, I had friends. Never in my life have I had so many friends. Lately I've come to believe that the process of growing older is essentially one of ruthless and continual editing, so that the novel of one's experience—at nineteen a huge and undisciplined mess, heavily annotated, the pages out of sequence—will by forty have resolved itself into a fairly conventional tale of provincial life, and by sixty be reduced to one of those incisive, "minimalist" works in which irony and wordplay displace "plot" (a word I put in quotation marks because Flint loathed it). Thus at thirty-eight I travel in a comparatively restricted circle. At nineteen, on the other hand, I had dozens of friends, and more than that, I looked upon every one of them as a potential intimate.

Occasionally, during those abundant days, I would run into my classmates from Flint's seminar. Mittman was one of the servers in my dining hall—she'd barely nod at me as she spooned eggs Florentine (hard-boiled eggs with spinach, and not Florentine at all) onto my plate. Baylor and I were taking the same big lecture course on the art of the Italian Renaissance. We used to encounter each other in the dimly lit gallery wherein were hung reproductions of the paintings and sculptures the titles and locations of which we were supposed to memorize for our midterm. In the gloomy silence she'd sometimes cast me a conspiratorial glance, as if we were members of one of the secret societies that flourished on the campus.

Once, at an informational meeting about an internship at a New

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