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A Tale Told by an Idiot

He was hunched over a dusty law book in the dry and empty library. His head felt like a bundle of gray marble shards and scraps of legal notes bound by a rope that seemed to be disintegrating into an airy ashen powder. Red ants crawled inside his eyes looking for a way out, and his nasal passages flared with each sulfurous breath.

He felt as if he were in a Picasso painting. The twisting silence was becoming unbearable; the rest of the law students must have taken the professor's sage advice not to cram before finals, but to get a good peaceful night's sleep. It would not be a good night for Winston Kingstone Manners the Fourth.

Winston rose to take a refresher. Staggering past the millions of casebooks, case reports, legal periodicals, and treatises, he thought he heard someone laughing. After finally finding a bathroom, Winston slipped into a stall, reached into his backpack and pulled out a silk pouch. He placed the silver mirror on his knees, cut four chalky strands, brought straw and mirror to his nose and inhaled. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and remembered bygone days when he could have gotten better coke for the same price.

"Baking soda. Bush is screwing up everything."

He returned to his desk and resumed studying. Realizing the coke was not inspiring him, he began to wonder if this was cocaine all. His mind drifted to Lori and he felt the rope around his head transforming into a steel cable. He shook his head and decided to find the memoirs of a dead defense attorney named Lavatch on Barnum vs. New York in the Biography section. New York was just another reminder.

"I hate New York. Why does the bitch have to go to school there? I saw her once this semester. Once. She can't blame me for sleeping around."

As he walked through the dim library, every step tightened the cable around his head. He stopped half way down the row, took a long breath, and then resumed his search. Every stride down the dim Biography aisle broke off splinters of gray marble in his head. He was almost there; the call numbers were increasing. The numbers rose, and the cable shrunk.

"LA 174.23, LA 174.45, LA 175.02. What the...?"

A small black book was on the shelf where Lavatch's biography should have been. The publisher's logo, a jester with a book in his hand, appeared on the lower part of the binding in place of the call number's white tab. His eyes searched the rest of the shelf, then checked the number in his

notes. He pulled out the book and read the title: The Life and Times of Winston Kingstone Manners the Fourth. Smiling, Winston opened the book close to the middle and saw there was nothing on the pages. He flipped through the beginning pages; only the first quarter of the book had handwritten words. Studying the words, he recognized his own handwriting.

"The Christmas gift for the man who has everything. And I do have everything. Simulated handwriting. My Mom and her Christmas presents."

Feeling that familiar rush, he now knew this was good coke hitting him after all. Ribbons of silk cradling diamonds slumbered like a crown on his shoulders. He rushed up the stairs to his desk.

"This is great. Screw finals and law school. Mom always wanted me to be a screwed up artist, anyway. Maybe Father will change his mind."

He sat down, shifted comfortably, and slowly turned the cover page. Winston frowned when he read the author's name.

"Feste? One of those names from Milton or some other idiot I read when I was an English major."

He realized he had been talking to himself aloud all night and blushed. He told himself that he didn't care. He turned to the first page:

"Winston Kingstone Manners the Fourth was conceived in the back seat of a 1964 Thunderbird after his parents' senior formal at 11:23 p.m. on May 12, 1966. Mr. Manners, not concerned about protection, was forcing himself on the not-yet Mrs. Manners who was too drunk to object. She had just been rebuffed by one of Winston's rommmates studying art and had thought sleeping with Winston would make Bill jealous. It seems only fitting that such a clumsy and moronic event inaugurated a life full of mistakes and cruelty."

Winston's face slowly turned an burning red as he reread the first sentences. He began to rave aloud.

"What the hell is this? Who wrote this crap? What kind of idiot would write one hundred pages of this bullshit?"

As he frantically read on, Winston slipped more and more into a nightmare. His breath was irregular and shallow. His heart was loud and low. Some of his anger slowly curled into fear. Whoever had written this knew him all too well. For some, the truth is no Christmas present.

For the next three and a half hours, Winston was in his own

personal hell in the coolness of the dim library. He felt the cable loosening and shards of marble and scraps of knowledge slipping out of their shackles. Among the pages of his life were slivers of glassy evils and wrongs he had done. Throwing rocks through windows, beating smaller children, and stealing friends' playthings passed hauntingly as ghostly elementary memories. He had not thought of these events in years and the distance and the regained clarity scared the hell out of him. His biographer furiously exorcised yesterdays from their graves with commanding mockery as if all of them would eventually rise somehow and somewhere against him. The beaten black boy, the date-raped freshman, and the threatened homosexual all stood over his shoulders and turned pages of his intermediated memory that had been stuck together by repression. The plagiarized papers, the stolen LSAT test, and finally the broken promise to Lori ignited his memory and stung his eyes that were sinking deep into his head and memory with no indication of slowing down. This was his life so far. An inferno of dishonesty and narcissism.

"Who knows all this? I mean who knows all this really happened? I can't get in trouble. There's no proof, this is just a book!"

He finished the printed section; or thought he had. Words suddenly rose up on what was once seen as a blank page.

"...yet the only good thing in his life was slipping away. For the short three months they had gone out before law school, Lori brought the best out of Winston. Lori, who had always been suspicious of some side of Winston she had never seen before, was falling in love with another man. Her doubts about Winston she blamed falsely on her fear of falling in love. She couldn't help falling for Pete. Working his way through graduate school as a small-time comic, Pete was a young scholar, with soft, warm eyes and a scruffy face, studying Shakesperean literature in New York at..."

"She is in love with that loser Peter! The artsy-fartsy fag I met in New York? That bitch! What is this now? A fucking Harlequin romance?"

"After seeing *Dead Poets Society*, they walked through the Village in the rain. They shared a bottle of wine in Pete's cluttered single room apartment. They talked about everything that was funny, sad, and true. After Pete said something to the effect that he couldn't talk to some strange woman in a bar since he would only be thinking of her, she kissed him. They passionately made love on the floor. Both had wanted to secretly for

months... Feeling a surprisingly strong bond to him for such a sort time of knowing him, Lori realized she had never felt more happy in a man's arms..."

The enraged Winston shoved the black book into his backpack, and ran for the telephone by the entrance of the library. With inaccurate fingers, he dialed her number collect.

"Will you accept a call from Winston?"

"Ah...Yeah. Yes. Winston?"

"Well, I hope I didn't disturb anything! You aren't fucking Peter now, are you?"

"What?"

"I've been reading this 'Life of Me' book where you fuck Peter the Shakespearean faggot! I thought we couldn't sleep with anyone else?"

"What book? What are you talking about?"

"Just answer yes or no! Are you fucking Peter or not?"

There was a pause. A silent suspended pause.

"I wanted to talk to you about this after finals."

"Fuck finals. I'm failing anyway. You fucked him."

"Stop it! Stop using that word!"

"What word? You mean 'fuck'? Oh yeah, I forgot! You made *love* to him! How *fucking* romantic!"

"I know you're upset, but if you use that word one more time, I'm hanging up!"

"Well, let me tell you something, my virginal mistress. I've *fucked* three different bitches this semester and they all had better bodies than you!"

"That's it, you hypocrite! I can't believe you're acting this way. I even thought you might have cried. Goodbye!"

"I don't cry over sluts like you!"

Winston slammed down the receiver and ripped open his backpack. He rummaged through his notebooks, Blackstone's condensed dictionary, and textbooks. The black book was not there.

"Where in hell did it go? God damn it! God damn it!"

Winston threw the contents of his pack around the foyer. His head twisted from side to side with the final gray shards and notes flying out, scattering and then disappearing before they touched the ground. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of an image, a figure through the window, outside. He squinted. The steamed windows and cold night air made it difficult to see what precisely it was. With no concern for his belongings, he charged through the doors. He now saw what it was. A smiling harlequin

waved the black book in his hand.

In the silence, they stood staring at each other. Winston's face was stony and grim while the harlequin's face was soft and cheerful. The fool, in his motley clothes and his three-belled cap, startled Winston when he began dancing and laughing in the dark night. Winston stared hard and saw it was Pete's face under the cap, the face he was introduced to two months ago in New York.

"How now, gentle lawyer."

"You fucking idiot! Give me back that book! You fucked up me and Lori!"

"Bring me a violin! Bring me a cello!

I am not Iago, you are not Othello!"

"Shut up you queer Shakespearean faggot! Give me that goddamn book or I'll beat the shit out of your sorry ass!"

Winston charged the clown. The clown casually pulled a fistful of blank pages from the book and threw them directly at the approaching Winston. Halfway before reaching Winston, the white papers ignited. Winston fell to the ground while the flaming blank pages of his life flew over his head. He felt sick in a way he had never felt before; he experienced a certain fear, the fear of the eternity. He knelt before the jester and heard his three belled cap clinking in the dark wind. The jester ripped single pages out of the book and for each page Winston moaned. Stumbling to his feet, he approached the jester.

"Pete, man, you can have Lori. Just give me the book...please."

"In borrowed robes, you dress me!

Oh, what fools these mortals be!

By the pricking of my thumb!

These law students sure are dumb!"

The fool, tearing out more pages and watching them light up, skipped off happily away from the weakening Winston. Trying to catch his breath, he slowly stumbled after the fool.

"Look, I don't know how you know all this shit on me, but I know you want Lori. Don't rip pages while I'm talking to you. Look, I was an English major at Dickinson. Shakespeare is cool. I even thought about being an English professor once. Are you trying to kill me?"

"Give this man a crown for his eggy head!

First thing done, killed lawyers are dead!

Shake your love, throw your spear!

Dead is dead is dead, said rosy King Lear!"

"You are so fucked up! What do you want, huh? Money? Here, I'll give you some. Dude, name your price, just give me back the book. Okay? Mr. Joker? Are you listening to me? God damn it! Just name your price. Answer me!"

"Hearts before diamonds, clubs before spades.

Love before money, murder before graves."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!"

The fool smiled, bounced to a nearby apartment building, and began to climb the black fire escape. Winston decided to grab the book the first chance he got as he weakly crept after the fool. The fool scaled the steel stairs, jumped from the escape to a window ledge, sat down, and resumed tearing out the book's white pages one by one. Pacing himself, Winston clambered up the escape while burning pages plunged past him to the ground. Finally at the top of the stairs, trying to catch his breath, Winston, flustered, contemplated whether or not he could make the fool's leap to the ledge.

"Voyeurs and a window! Lawyers and a jury!

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury!

Words, words, words! Shadows and their tale.

By breath of unfed lawyers, leaping lords often fail."

"Look man. We are one in the same. I could have been a lot like you. I recognize all that shit. *Macbeth*, ah, *Hamlet*. Right? 'The Twelve Days of Christmas.' I'm feeling really sick so cut me a break. Dude? I don't fucking believe this! Stop ripping out pages, you asshole! You're killing me!"

Winston desperately jumped trying to grab hold of the fool, but there was nothing there, only a shadow. Winston only ripped the last blank page out of the book and clutched it in his hand down five long stories to his dusty death.

"I am better than thou art now. I am a Fool, thou art nothing."

The police the next morning gathered the evidence. They found traces of cocaine and what they thought might be some sort of new hallucinogenic in Winston's blood stream. They considered the book found near what was left of his head to be the most elaborate suicide note of self-hatred and guilt in D.C.'s history. Winston's parents were notified, and at the funeral everyone except a few said there was something too good about Winston for this world.

Lori cried many nights and Pete was understanding. They attended

the funeral together. Slowly, the guilt and pain left Lori. Tall tales and long stories do kill. On earth, the law of gravity, never appealed, still reigns equally over everyone. For this world is only a fool's paradise where poetic justice resides supreme, a paradise only for fools in love.

Mark Ian Schwartz
RC '90

