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Words on Paper

I had never seen a face so contorted. My friend and colleague, Julie Vondracek, sat down in exhaustion, setting an elaborately inlaid wooden box on the surface of the study table. She looked horrible. Her hair was a tangled mess and she was dressed in a tee-shirt and jeans, both of which looked slept in. We were in a dim corner of the Lewis & Clark library, somewhat secluded by construction walls and make-shift shelving units. Beads of sweat clung to Julie's tangled hair line, and the little brown wedges in her blue eyes seemed to dart this way and that. She wore that punchy, silly expression people get after studying or working all night, like they could break into hysterical laughter or start sobbing at any second. I knew overtaxing herself was something she was prone to do.

It was no secret that Julie had been struggling with her work on the nature of story-telling. She'd been taking eaves-dropped notes in hotel lobbies, bars, restaurants, and countless other spots across the state of Oregon all summer with few results other than a massive collection of boring hyperbole and outrageous lies. Her position—that story is more effective than reason as a means of stimulating action, even among those who like to think they operate only on logical premises—just wasn't panning out. Trying to convince her that magical thinking is a token of the primitive mind, and that she should take up more serious academic subject matter, is something I had pretty much given up. We've always enjoyed kidding each other about our divergent interests, though I've been known to make remarks that are more cutting than playful. Frankly, it looked to me that she would be mired in assistant professorships forever. I made the mistake of telling her so at one of our bi-weekly lunches last month, thus revealing, accidentally, that I wasn't prepared to use my recently acquired and fairly signifi-

cant influence with the chairman of the English Department to support her cause. I had to beg her to come back to the cafeteria table—Julie can over-emote like that on occasion.

That was the last time we'd talked, and as preparation for the new school year got me extremely busy, I didn't notice we'd missed a couple of lunch dates—not until the day I came into my office and heard the end of her frantic message imploring me to rush to the library. I immediately headed across campus as quickly as I could, certain she had been fired. I must admit something inside me felt that a new academic direction, voluntary or not, was exactly what Julie needed. Just seconds after I took a seat, she arrived, almost staggering. After slumping into a chair and taking several deep breaths, Julie pushed aside the peculiar box she had placed on the table, and without offering any explanation for her strange behavior or mentioning anything about her job-status, related the following story:

She had learned of a religious movement that originated in England just before the turn of the fourteenth century. It was known as Buccalism, and its central tenet was that the act of writing was blasphemous. Julie explained that Buccalite priests understood language as a system of unfixed symbols, all derived and differentiated from one, transcendental symbol. This symbol would be the single, stable source of all others, in other words, God. The Buccalites reasoned that to write was therefore to endeavor to produce an image of God, regardless of how indirectly.

A student walked by us holding a book no more than two inches from his glasses, and I took advantage of the distraction to interpose that the Buccalites sounded vaguely familiar, that they seemed to have developed an amalgam of Jewish and Lollard prohibitions against creating images of God. Julie nodded her head momentarily, then silenced me with a wave of her hand. I wanted to know what all this had to do with her looking so worn-down and upset, but didn't want to push her if she was getting around to telling me some bad news in her own way. Besides, my field is Intellectual History, so I was interested in what Julie might have found. I pulled my chair closer to the table as she continued her description of The Buccalites.

To expose the evils of the written word, Julie explained, Buccalite theologians produced ingenious examples of equally plausible, but contradictory, interpretations of Biblical text. When they got a potential convert's attention, they inundated him with demonstrations of how all such interpretations fluctuate with the changing meaning of

fallen asleep in, resulted in complete disappointment. She was moping around her living room, just at the point of returning to face her academic troubles, when a knock called her to the door. Julie opened it to find a squat, barrel-legged postal carrier looking fearfully into her eyes.

It was late evening, so Julie was confused at the sight of the mailman, who didn't seem to be holding any sort of package. The man looked disoriented and couldn't seem to speak, so he and Julie stood there staring at each other until the little man recovered himself. After throwing a worried glance over his shoulder, he spoke in a rapid, staccato voice, telling Julie he knew she had overheard the meeting of the Buccalites and that her recent inquiries had placed her in danger. He wouldn't give his name, but he told her he was a member of the group. Julie invited him in, and he stepped inside as frantically as if he were stepping from the path of a train.

Once inside, the mailman filled in more of the Buccalite's history for Julie. Sweating and nervous, he explained that Julie had found no written material about the group because everyone who had ever attempted to write about the Buccalites in the past had been killed and their work destroyed. When Julie tried to ascertain why the mailman had come to her, his limbs contracted a bit and his shoulders hunched. He seemed to grow even smaller than he was. The cringing postal carrier lowered his voice to a hush and whispered, "The Priests are after me because I am a coward." His voice trailed off, "They're tailing me."

"What did you do?" Julie asked, hoping he wouldn't leave her stranded with such partial information. Perhaps her kind eyes comforted him because he kept talking. "I've been an associate member of the Buccalites for six months now, and I've been a model fellow. I'm good at my job. And, you see, after six months, there is the official initiation. I know very well no one ever leaves the Buccalites, but, I guess I just never took it all that seriously. Leaving never occurred to me because I believed what they taught—I still do! But, a while back, some of the guys started joking around with me about the "secret"—something I'd learn at the initiation. They said, after the secret, no one ever even dreams about leaving the group. And the truth is, they scared me. I didn't let on, but as the date got closer, I kept imagining horrible things about the secret. I don't like pain. I don't deal with threats well, either. My initiation was supposed to happen last weekend, but I panicked. I didn't show up. For a week now I've been doing my job, as always, pretending the whole thing is a dream, but I know they're

following me. If I've screwed up my life, I'm going to do something right before they get me. That's why I came to warn you. Someone in the book store remembered you came in early and left very late the day of the meeting, and he knew your name."

"Who could that have been?" I wondered aloud, alarmed at the thought of shady or worse characters asking questions about Julie.

"I have no idea," Julie told me while scrutinizing the room in a discomfiting way. "Lot's of L & C's work there. I figure a former student recognized me."

I nodded my head and Julie went on. She said mentioning the Priests must have brought the edge of the mailman's fear back into focus, because he rose abruptly and headed toward the door. Julie was stunned by the whole story, especially the thought that one of the employees had given out her name. As the blue-uniformed man reached for the knob and opened the door, Julie stood and, for lack of anything helpful to say, asked him how he could possibly work for the postal service. He offered her a wry smile and said, "The postal service is full of Buccalites, it's one of the places we do serious damage." The grin was gone as soon as it appeared, and, without saying good-bye, he stepped back into the dimming evening.

I had to interrupt Julie here, "So the same lunatics are after you now because you know about them?"

"Wait, hold on," she warned and went on to explain that she stayed up all night thinking about the whole strange affair. The only thing she couldn't accept was how any group, no matter how great the extent of their resources, could have destroyed everything ever written about it. I agreed, saying that the group could never keep up with a world-wide web of computer lines and digital memories. "You would think so," Julie replied in an oddly dark tone. She, in fact, made use of the world wide web over the next ten days doing on-line searches of thousands of libraries and E-mailing and phoning book shops everywhere she could. Again, nothing. But again, just as she was ready to abandon the whole issue, she was rewarded.

An electronic message arrived from Davis Donovan Lang, a bookshop owner in London. It related the following: Mr. Lang's wife, Elsa, had been an expert on heretical movements. Before her death seven years ago, she had been putting all of her rare reference books onto audio tapes for "insurance." At the time, Lang wrote, he thought she was just paranoid, but didn't mind humoring her. Fortunately, Elsa stored the

paced around the table until they walked away. Grabbing my chair when they were gone, I spun it around and straddled it backward, leaning toward Julie, eager for the rest of the details. She took a deep breath before describing how McDevitt drove her to a shining white complex overlooking the waterfront. She said her stomach was tightening every minute and she was trying like crazy not to show her nerves. In the entryway, the little man rang a buzzer next to 'Apt. 1711' and whispered into the speaker before three long beeps gained them entrance. Riding in the elevator McDevitt spoke quietly. "You'll be welcomed," he said. "You seem like a woman of true valor. Just remember, contradiction is what defines us, not what undermines us. Do you deal well with ambiguity Ms. V.?"

I've seen Julie stressed out before. She becomes slightly goofy and will fall back on quips when she can. So, the way she responded to McDevitt's question didn't surprise me. She said, "I think I feel certain ways with certain types of ambiguity. It depends." Then, she smiled a no doubt shaky smile and McDevitt grinned back.

"Definitely, a woman of valor," the mailman repeated, pleased with the response. On the seventeenth floor, McDevitt unlocked a pale blue door and led Julie through a plushly carpeted vestibule to a thick oaken door on which he knocked four times. An non-descript elderly man dressed in a three piece suit opened the door and flashed Julie a welcoming smile.

"You're the High Priest, Hello," she said plainly, sounding cool but quaking with nervousness. The High Priest nodded his head slightly and led her inside, closing the door on McDevitt who had already turned and left. It turned out that the High Priest's name was Solochevski. Julie said there was absolutely nothing interesting about the way he looked, and that, in fact, she couldn't describe his face if her life depended on it. The one striking feature about him, she said, was an incredible calmness that seemed to surround his body. Julie said her tension simply evaporated literally seconds after meeting him, even though she knew that cult leaders were infamous for producing such effects on people. Skipping small talk, Solochevski took Julie into what she assumed was the secret room, although it was just a locked door they passed through. A short hallway led them into a library with completely empty shelves. At the far end of the room was a small safe on a circular wooden table. There were two chairs at the table. The High Priest led Julie across the barren library where they sat down.

"I understand you are a very sharp woman, Ms. Vondracek," said the High Priest when they were comfortable. "I will gladly share the secret of the Buccalites with you."

Julie put her hand up for Solochevski as she does so often to me. "Wait a minute," she said. "I'm not a Buccalite. Why would you do this?"

Solochevski smiled and turned to the safe. As he was spinning the combination he said in a conversational tone, "When you know the secret, you will be a Buccalite." Julie sat back and noticed how fast her heart was beating. She said it wasn't fear, though. It was just a sudden and desperate need to confirm her hypothesis about the secret. The High Priest opened the safe's door and brought out an ornate wooden box. He placed it gingerly on the table and slid it in front of her. Then, he opened it, revealing a worn parchment.

"I don't believe it!" I exclaimed, slapping my forehead in amazement. "The lousy hypocrites!"

"Wait!" Julie waived me back to attention. "I panicked when he pushed it across the table to me. I don't know what overcame me. I suddenly lost confidence when I thought about how long the Buccalites have survived. I realized the horrible power of what must be on that paper! It repulsed me and attracted me at the same time. Before I knew what I was doing, I had slammed the box shut, snatched it up, and was bolting out of the place. You should have seen Solochevski's face. It was the last thing on earth he expected."

"Jesus! There was no one to stop you?"

"No! I swear to God, I was expecting a cage to drop on me, or to be hit by poison darts or something as I sprinted through the apartment and into the elevator. I guess they didn't think I had it in me."

"Oh, my god, Julie," I said, looking down at the elaborate old box that lay between us. Its craftsmanship impressed me when she first put it on the table, but now it seemed even more intricate, more beautiful. "This is serious. This could kill them," I said.

"Exactly!" she said triumphantly. "I knew you'd see that." She looked at me seriously then, "Do you know what this means?"

"That the Buccalites are a bunch of liars."

"No," she said sternly. "Before the original sect was annihilated someone wrote down an argument for their position."

"But it's impossible. It's self-defeating."

Julie sat up abruptly with a peaceful look on her face. She looked me straight in the eyes and said, "No, David. Thank you. You've done me so great a favor, you can't possibly understand."

I was confused and had already started looking over my shoulder for McDevitt or Solochevski's henchmen. I looked back at Julie. She was grinning. "Thank you, David," she repeated, inexplicably.

"For what?" I asked, distracted by the change in her. The little brown wedges in her eyes had settled.

"For settling our argument, once and for all," she said.