

ACT ONE

(An office at an elite northeastern college. There's a stately, antique mahogany desk. There's a high wall of bookcases, filled with an overwhelming number of books.)

(There are a few framed images from revolutionary movements: a Lech Wałęsa/Solidarity poster; a painting of the Tennis Court Oath; a photo of Emiliano Zapata; a photo of Nelson Mandela in a Springbok uniform; maybe an image from the Arab Springs; and a portrait of George Washington.)

(JANINE [early sixties, white] is behind the desk in an ergonomic chair. ZOE [twenty, black] sits in a folding chair across from her.)

(They are looking over a paper. ZOE sips from a Venti Starbucks cup.)

JANINE. You're missing a comma here.

(She holds the paper out to ZOE. ZOE looks.)

ZOE. Oof. Yeah. I definitely am.

JANINE.

Always proofread in hard copy.

Proofreading on a computer ZOE.

does not work. / Excellent word *(Agreeing.)* Mmm.

choices by the way. I don't think

I've ever had a student use

"bedeviled" in a paper before.

I love that word. All the "be"

words, bemuse, beguile.

ZOE. Beseech. Um. Bedazzle...

JANINE. Beget.

ZOE. Classic. Betoken.

JANINE. Bemoan. Oh, I could do this all day. Focus Janine.

Next comment. Ah, here, you have -

"Washington succeeded owing to his presenting himself as a leader, elite status as a plantation owner, and his ability to establish commonality."

ZOE. Yes...

JANINE.

Have you heard of the idea of **ZOE.**

parallelism? / Of - matching Oo - shoot, yeah,

grammatical structure - Because

here you have "presenting

himself as a leader" - gerund

- "elite status" - noun - "his

ability" - noun with possessive

pronoun. Can you hear it? /

Yeah, yeah -

Whereas if you imagine - "His

ability to present himself as a

leader, to project elite status,

and / to establish commonality."

"And to establish

commonality."

JANINE. Yes - yes! There are a plethora of options, three gerunds, three nouns, but any one of them telegraphs to your reader - "You are in safe hands. This writer will not do anything truly horrible to you, like assaulting you with grammatically incompatible clauses."

ZOE. No, totally. My English teacher made us do like 800 worksheets on it senior year I just - I wanted to get the draft in early so I could get your comments before the deadline, and to be honest I had kind of a tough weekend and I didn't get to proofread as much as I normally would.

JANINE. Oh. Well.

ZOE. Okay. So I correct all of that, and then the writing's good?

JANINE. Well... It's a bit more complicated. I've written suggestions, but - do you have a little more time?

ZOE. Yeah, I mean, I want to make it as strong as possible.

But I know office hours are almost over, if you -

JANINE. Oh, it's no problem. I just turned in a draft of my new book so there's *no* chance I'll be productive. I have absolutely nothing to do until dinner with my better half at 8:30.

ZOE. Haha, well, hopefully it won't take that long!

Um, so what else is there to fix?

JANINE. Well...it could all use a bit more flair.

ZOE. ...Flair?

JANINE. If you want to get through to a reader, you have to make the past feel human. And real. For instance!

(**JANINE** gets up and goes to *the bookcases to hunt for a book.* **ZOE** checks her phone.)

Have you ever been to India?

ZOE. No. Never.

JANINE. It's really - it's quite spectacular. The spirituality is - jubilant. And who knew lentils could be delicious?

You really must go sometime.

ZOE. Well I do like lentils.

JANINE. You know this place has oodles of money for travel, if it's related to research. I had a student once who developed his entire senior thesis around getting funding to visit places where he wanted to bungee jump. He's now a district attorney for a major American city. You're a history major?

ZOE. Poly sci.

JANINE. Ah. Well. That's all right. And you're a - which year are you?

ZOE. Junior.

JANINE. My son is a junior! Zachary Wheeler.

ZOE. Oh! He's in my section for Modern Poetry. He's really smart.

JANINE. I like to think so. His being a student here...it's been interesting. It's forced me to see my students not

just as walking thesis statements but as human beings. Which is of course very disorienting. Here it is!

I'm really not as informed about South Asia as I ought to be, I'm trying to bone up, and I ran into this anecdote.

So, there is a province called Sindh, okay, in what is today Southern Pakistan. In 1843, Charles James Napier was sent there by the East India Company to put down a rebellion. But at the Battle of Hyderabad he conquered the whole area, and he sent a telegram - now, keep in mind, these British men, they had all been at the same fancy private schools, or rather, public schools, as the Brits put it *quite* ridiculously, and they all had these absurd classical educations, and anyway Napier sends a telegram back to the Colonial Office containing one word. *Peccavi*.

As in "Quoniam peccavi ignosce pater" - Forgive me Father for I have sinned. Get it! Sinned. "I have Sindh." / As in the province!

ZOE. Ha, yeah. That's - pretty disturbing.

JANINE. Oh, God, yes, I mean he's making a *joke* about decimating a civilization.

ZOE. Like - we just killed people - hilarious!

JANINE. It's *awful*.

Only it's also so revealing. Armies were raised, lands ravaged, all in an attempt to impress friends from prep school. You learn a lot from a story like that.

ZOE. Yeah. Yeah, I can see that.

JANINE. (*Coming back with the book.*) Do you like my chair? It's supposed to help you stretch out your cervical disks, or something like that.

I have bad back pain. The result, I'm afraid, of a lifetime of scouring sources. It's like some ghastly metaphor about the price we pay for knowledge. Don't hunch, Zoe, when you are looking for your new, illuminating

evidence, never hunch. Pull the evidence up to you. What my son would call a protip.

You see what I mean though?

ZOE. Yeah, it looks like a really supportive chair.

JANINE. No, about - about evidence. Peccavi. *That's* the kind of story I want you to put in your paper. Or or - here's one of my favorites. So - 1775, fighting has broken out near Boston, and the Continental Congress meets to appoint a general for their new army.

George Washington's a top contender - he's probably the person in the country most experienced with military command. But - colonial Americans - you'll remember from class, they were so worried about tyranny. There had never been a country before, in human history, that managed to sustain a system where the people chose their own government.

ZOE. Right. They all ended in chaos or dictatorships.

JANINE. *Exactly*. They're terrified the new general will just seize power.

ZOE. The Julius Caesar thing.

JANINE. Yes. Now, Washington wants the job very badly, but he's strategic. When he's asked about taking command, he tells Congress, "Though I am sensible of the high honour done me, yet I feel great distress, for fear that my abilities and my experience may not be equal to the task." But here's the best part - he showed up to give that speech in his military uniform. So he's basically saying, please don't give me this job, and the whole time, he's *wearing his résumé*.

Can you hear it?

The, the detail - the / palpable -

ZOE. Yeah. Definitely.

JANINE. I think that's an absolutely wonderful story.

To imagine those men - not knowing they would pick Washington. Struggling to figure things out. I would give anything to be in that room. Wouldn't you?