

Do You Think?

At the last minute discretionary funding came through that I could use any way I wanted, three positions. Well, we needed somebody in Early Modern, so that was Harris. And it was Mary's turn for help in Backgrounds, as she'd been reminding us ever since we out-voted her candidate to get that guy from Princeton. When he quit, we lost that whole line, of course, but that didn't alter Mary's calculations any. So I got her Samantha Rollins, who came highly recommended from St. Alban's, which had just combined two whole departments, languages and literatures. I don't know if you heard that Samantha was out over there, but Mary had known her since they were girls in the convent. I didn't know that about Mary, by the way, did you? That she'd gone to a convent? When she mentioned it I said, "No. *You?*" Well, we had a good laugh, because "Yes, yes, I can see it" wouldn't have been so flattering, either. Talk about damned either way.

Anyway, so I had this other position left over. Well, Fred had just the guy. One of the first things you learn as chair is that once you let Fred into your office, he won't leave until you give him what he wants. This guy he suggested had been doing comp for us for years, but Fred said he'd written a book of poems that had made runner-up in one competition and honorable mention in another. Good contests, too, with prize names I recognized myself, and Fred pointed out that if we got him on a one-year, then the next time he won, we'd already have that feather in our cap. So I said OK. He could teach the multi-genre intro course and a workshop, and we'd give him a couple of gen-ed lits, maybe a Lit Methods during Spring.

So on Bastille Day, which of course Suzanne never lets go unobserved around our house, I called these three people up while she was making preparations for our picnic. Never in my life had I heard anybody so glad to answer the phone. It's not every job that gives you an opportunity to feel like you're changing somebody's life -- *saving* it, Samantha Rollins said -- and after about the third week of the semester not even this one does, so I felt better than I had since being pressed into service, as it were, pending our outside search. No, no, I'm glad to do it, of course.

But the good feeling didn't last long. You try, you try not to be an alarmist. You try not to focus on the trouble spots or make mountains out of molehills. But if there's one thing

this whole episode has taught me, it's that nine times out of ten, to overlook a pimple in September is to have to deal with a boil by June. To wit, this guy that Fred thought was going to be such a bargain.

His name was Rippert, Robert Rippert. I must have passed him in the halls many times before, and Fred had described him to me, too, though just by vital stats -- Caucasian, he'd quipped, deadpan; you know Fred -- and I didn't know which one he was until the first day of classes, when everybody was running around trying to change their room assignments and copy their syllabi. And here's this huge guy in the middle of the office in a pair of workman's pants with suspenders and a beard down to his navel, blinking around and chewing what I thought was gum. I mean, I thought he was there to fix the copier!

"Is it down again?" I asked him. "It's right there."

His hand came out so fast I thought he had something sharp in it.

"I'm Robert Rippert."

No expression in his voice or smile on his face that I could tell, just a slow, pale blink behind glasses with outsize red plastic frames. On the phone he'd sounded perfectly normal. His shirt had a picture of a whale on it, as far as I could tell behind his beard, but when he put his hand back in his pocket I saw *two* whales, mating. And this was the first day of the semester!

"You must have a Tuesday-Thursday schedule," I said, but he shook his head. Now he did smile, or rather, his eyes crinkled and a hole appeared in the upper portion of his beard. I smelled tobacco. Not smoke but juice! I was so alarmed I got dizzy, and I went into my office and closed the door. Through the glass I saw him say something to the student help, Nell, an attractive young woman who might have done better in my Joyce and Joyceans had she not incurred some sort of unfortunate family tragedy that semester. Rippert leaned over her in such a way that I made a note to ask Karen to have a talk with her staff about what's appropriate to wear at the front desk and what is not. I mean his eyes were indistinguishable from his huge lenses. "Good luck, fella," I thought, but when he stood back, Nell was laughing, not at him but *with* him. Well, if the man had some sort of

redeeming wit, so much the better. I was still grasping at straws, you see.

The complaints started after mid-term, as I've come to learn they usually do. Rippert's were the first I got.

"He's rude," said the girl, because the first one was a girl. "He called me sloppy. Me!"

She extended her arms. She was not one of these feral kids of the Nez Percé but a nice, clean girl in knee socks, an alpaca sweater, and braces on her teeth. She turned a notebook around so I could see her handwriting and his.

"Which one's better?" she asked, and even before I took the notebook from her we shared a smile, because the whole page was filled with her regular, smooth script, a little on the round side but more than legible -- the penmanship of someone who takes pride in her work and even joy in the swirls and switchbacks of the capital G. Then at an angle in the left-hand margin, leaking into her beautiful script in trembling capital letters like twigs, was the word SLOPPY and, at another angle below that and in purple, since apparently on the first 'P' the red had begun to run out, THINKING.

She could tell she'd scored a point -- I could see that in her eyes. She'd clipped her hair back tight but had left little corkscrews at her temples. I smelled something -- jasmine, maybe -- very pleasant. I pushed the notebook back and promised her I'd speak with Mr. Rippert.

"Oh? So he's *not* a doctor?"

From her inflection I deduced he'd told them that he was, and I made a mental note to ask him about that, too. I told Miss Banks -- she was the daughter of Jennifer Banks over in Records, as I was to learn when I ran into Jennifer that very weekend in Eagan's, in produce -- about the funding limitations under which we of necessity must operate, and I told her, choosing my words carefully, that Mr. Rippert had been with us for a good long time in a lesser capacity, and so I appreciated this feedback on how he was faring at his new post. Well, excessive honesty has always been my problem, but we exchanged another look. Jennifer's daughter left -- on those unfortunate huge shoes, a concession to the fashion of her peers that I hadn't noticed before, hidden as they'd been under my desk -- and I wrote up my notes and buzzed Karen to call Rippert in. It was a Thursday.

“Well, first thing in the morning, then,” I said.

His shirt had the name of a bar on it this time, Pookie’s, and a martini glass tilting in the vicinity of his sternum -- which I could see because he’d *braided* his beard, not once but in two pigtails that he fiddled with as he sat where Jennifer’s daughter had, ankle on knee. I think there’s something in the handbook about collars that I might have been able to point out to him, but it seemed rather pointless in the context of a braided beard. He chewed his nails, I saw, some so deeply that dried blood had caked around his cuticles. I looked away as I summarized the salient points of Jennifer’s daughter’s accusations.

“Margo Banks?” he said, laughing. “Margo came in?”

I failed to understand his reaction, though I honestly did try.

“She’s one of my favorite students!” he said.

“The feeling’s not mutual, apparently.”

“Oh, but it is! Don’t you think?”

The hole in his beard appeared, and I gathered from the squinty look of the milky eyes behind the red frames that he was inviting me to join in some irony he felt -- at a vision of her complaining even more vehemently to her other professors’ chairs, perhaps? I felt that I should remind him of the gravity of even one complaint.

“Grave?” he said, looking around the office as if I’d apologized for how messy it was when it wasn’t (though it was, but I hadn’t). “Look. Margo’s smart, but she’s lazy. You’ve got to jolt her a little. [I had led with his ‘sloppy thinking’ crack.] Actually, coming in here shows how smart she is. She wants to believe what I say, but she’s not going to without checking me out.”

That reminded me of my second point, which did give him pause, if only for a second.

“I never mentioned my degree. I told them to call me Bob, if they want. Sets a friendlier tone. Do you think?”

Bob! *I* didn’t want to call him Bob! In the long term, I didn’t know *what* I was going to do about him, but at that point I knew I didn’t want to see him in my office any longer. Luckily Karen saw me through the glass and buzzed me, in accordance with a system we’d worked out.

“Listen,” I said wearily, my hand over the mouthpiece. “I have to take this call. But I’m glad we’ve had

the opportunity to have this little chat. I think it's been valuable."

You DO? he said with his face as he got up, the insubordinate cur.

And watch your damn handwriting! I said with mine.

By Thanksgiving I had a litany, everything from half a dozen more student complaints to bellowing in the hallways and graham-cracker crumbs on the sofa in the lounge. He and Nell had become fast friends -- I couldn't believe it had gone any further than that -- and he'd stand right there between her desk and the mailboxes and swap stories about other faculty, even as they came in to get their mail.

"Oh, Harding's a pussycat," I heard him say once when I opened my door, which, more and more often as the semester heated up, I was keeping shut. "Aren't you, Harding?"

Caldwell Harding, who did this job for twenty-five years, turned around by degrees, grasping a large mailing envelope that contained the new *Norton Anthology of English Poetry* (which I happened to know because I'd just opened mine). The man looks less feline than any human being I've ever met. His hair is almost gone now, and since the stroke the whole left side of his face has dropped, so the right side of his upper lip seems raised in a perpetual sneer. As Emeritus he comes in only just in time to check his mail on Wednesday evenings before his seminar, during which for the entire three hours he reads aloud. (According to a student evaluation; another chair perk is knowing what everybody does in class.) He turned toward my office with a move like a stumble, that face asking, *And who the hell is this guy?*

But what came out of his mouth was, "Meow."

Hugely, Nell and Rippert both laughed.

"He's so amazing!" she told Rippert as if he'd just sawed a lady in half. "He can still be so funny!" Rippert beamed back at her as if he'd accomplished something himself, rocking up on his toes. Since the first snowfall he'd show up in what Karen told me were logger's boots, then change into what he had on then, red knit booties with plastic soles and a snowflake design on the tips.

With fingers like claws Harding reached out for a girl who was trying to sneak through to the seminar room, her

books clutched to her stomach as if she were smuggling them in. "Class is cancelled," he snapped. "I'm sick."

"Oh!" she said, fairly trembling with awe and concern. She was a skinny and traumatized-looking thing anyway, with pale skin and lifeless hair and a skirt like a slip. "Oh, I'm sorry, Professor!"

"It's not *your* fault," he brayed. "But by next week, I might very well be dead."

I mean, Rippert is just not cut from the same cloth, and what I'd do for more of that old calico. They just don't make them like Harding anymore.

From the litany:

"He smells," said a freckled Delta Sig in a baby-blue sweatshirt she wore with the hood up.

"It's this spoiled vegetably smell," said a friend who'd come in with her, whose add-a-bead necklace was completely full. "Or you go in for your conference and he's farted."

I looked up from my notepad. *Passed gas*, I wrote once they'd left.

"He gave me a C on my screenplay, and it's the best thing I ever wrote."

"It is," guaranteed the friend in the hood. "And *I* got a C on my poem, which was the best thing *I* ever wrote."

Forgetting me, they smiled at each other and began mimicking him:

"Do you think?"

"Do you think?"

The conference ended in giggles -- theirs, while I finished my notes, though I recognized his line, all right. *Browbeating*, I added on my own.

From the litany:

"He got up on the desk and barked like a dog," said the darkest complected of three guys in identical buzz haircuts and huge shirts and pants.

"It was actually kind of funny, the first time," said the shortest one, grinning until a look from his buddies silenced him.

"The first time?" I said.

"It's become sort of the theme of the class," said the dark one, apparently the leader. "Somebody'd meant to write

‘higher power,’ but on the worksheet it came out as ‘higher bowwow.’ They’d used Spell-Check.”

“Which can’t tell the difference,” explained the short kid, to the ill-concealed disgust of his friends. “If it’s a legitimate word, I mean, in any context.”

“He’s always telling us to use our brains,” complained the kid who hadn’t said anything yet. He arranged his fingers over his mouth in a fair approximation of Rippert’s jutting beard, speaking through the arch his index fingers formed. “Use your brains, not electronics. What if the power goes out?”

“Or, ‘what if the bow wow goes out,’” the dark kid wrapped up, “and he’s up on the desk again, wagging his arm behind him like a tail.”

From the litany:

“He’ll slap the board with a yardstick? One time I was taking a nap? And I dreamed I was facing a firing squad? And then I woke up and he was making these sounds on the blackboard? And everyone was looking at me?”

“He climbs up on the desk.”

“He thinks he’s a dog.”

“Do you think? ‘Do you think?’”

“You can’t get above a C from him.”

“He won’t give above a C. This from a guy who gets up on all fours on his desk and barks.”

From the litany:

“He calls us ‘Podner,’” said a boy who came in with his mother, a thickset woman in no mood for jokes. “I’m not his *podner*. I’m a poet.”

“Eddie’s going to be the next Phil Donahue,” said his mother with grim admiration. “And I never heard of this Rippert guy.”

“Phil Donahue, the talk-show host?” I said, without thinking. Suzanne used to watch him.

“The poet.” She flashed defensive, then turned grimly admiring again. “The man’s a wizard!”

“Not Donahue, Ma. Donne. And it’s John, not Phil. But you’re right, he’s a wizard. If a little . . .” Eddie winced at the ceiling . . . “old-fashioned, I guess would be the literary term. But he’s only my first influence.”

For the first time, I felt something almost like sympathy for our man with the red slipper socks.

“And what exactly is the nature of your complaint against Mr. Rippert?”

The mother glanced over her shoulder at a stack of *College English* journals dating back to the mid-Fifties as if to see who might be lurking behind it, though I’d closed the door when she’d led her son in.

“Well. . .” Gone was her grimness: she was wide-eyed and confidential, suddenly. “Eddie just doesn’t think the guy’s very *good*.”

Eddie was squinting at the window with a mild smile, as if something puzzling but strangely beautiful had just appeared there. Through my plate glass I saw Karen with her finger poised over her buzzer, waiting for our sign.

I gave it, but it was Mr. Rippert’s final straw.

The handbook stipulates that in order to take action against a faculty member on the grounds of incompetence you have to provide ample warning and opportunity to respond. I had no action in mind beyond nonrenewal, but these are litigious times, as the bailiff said when the judge sat down, and I wanted to do everything correctly. The Eddie Putz episode, as I came to think of it, was no real help, and the odors were hard to substantiate. And Margo Banks had quit school to join a convent, her mother told me during the holidays when I ran into her at Eagan’s, over by cleaning supplies -- she was so embarrassed she could barely look up from the label of a toilet-bowl cleaner she grabbed when I turned down the aisle, but I gave her Mary’s number, and later Mary told me that she, Jennifer, had found it a relief to talk. Anyway. The Harding thing too would have been hard to make a case about, but by March I had more than enough new complaints to choose from, including one so solid that, in conjunction with the barking behavior, I decided to use it.

First, though, I laid my groundwork. Two weeks after mid-term, I had Karen call Rippert in. Nell had left to study in Holland, somebody said, though rumors had her pregnant. At any rate her replacement, a baseball player on scholarship, wasn’t working out too well. Most of the time he showed up when he was supposed to, but in headphones connected to a portable music panel of some sort that made him miss half our phone calls. Therefore, Karen had to keep her eye on her own

phone lights and her back to my door, and naturally I hadn't let the ballplayer in on my signal, though he would have made a better bouncer than Nell, if worse came to worst.

And don't think I wasn't thinking it might, given Rippert's increasingly aberrant behavior. At the first breath of warm weather he'd shaved his head, as many people do nowadays, but his skull seemed exceptionally lumpy, and he hadn't touched his beard. And he wore Bermuda shorts, though we'd had another snowstorm since the thaw of his haircut, and on the Friday I called him in, we were forecast for another. In fact Karen, who lives all the way out in Gibbons, had asked me if she could leave early, so at three-thirty it was just me, the baseball player, and the be-Bermuda-shortsed Rippert. They looked like corduroy.

"They are. Made 'em myself," he said, as if that were why I'd called him in. He pinched a fold in each thigh as he sat down, the way you'd do a pair of tailored dress slacks, then hoisted an ankle on a knee. He had his logger's boots on; I suppose he was on his way home. But he hadn't brought a briefcase or a bookbag or even a gradebook in with him. He laced his fingers behind his waxy-looking head and asked me what was up. *Up!* I chose my words carefully.

"The sky is up," I said. "Clouds are up, and tree branches are, and right here in this office, the ceiling is up. Also, up you will find a higher power."

I was watching his reactions very carefully, you see. At my first words he looked dismayed, somewhat in the manner of the two boys who'd come in with the buddy who embarrassed him. Then he looked almost angry, then puzzled, but by the time I wound up on *higher power*, he was back to his characteristic infuriating levity.

"Bow wow," he said.

"So you *admit* it?"

Somehow, I was on my feet. For the first time all year I saw the flicker of an appropriate seriousness cross his face.

"Admit what?"

I sat down, deciding to change tactics.

"Dahlia Flowers came in to see me, Mr. Rippert."

He blinked at my formal mode of address. Not that I'd ever called him Bob, but he'd never called me anything but Merle. Only Harding had I ever heard him call by anything other than his first name, hardly a move toward respect.

“I know Dahlia,” he said. “Sure. ‘Student’ is pushing it a bit, though.”

I let this pass, though I made a mental note. Respect for students, too, is mentioned in the handbook.

“Mostly she shares with us pages from her diary. One’s labelled ‘poem,’ another ‘story,’ the next ‘essay.’ They’re all in the first person and about her boyfriend.”

His eyes flicked ceilingward in such a way that an awful possibility struck me.

“Maybe you’d like to get your gradebook, Mr. Rippert?”

He shook his head, then tapped a temple just above the start of his beard. “I don’t use one. It’s all up here. She’s gotten a C on everything except her journal, which she’s going to get a C+ on, because she writes a little more often than the others. About her boyfriend. With missing pages for essays and poems.”

“You don’t use a *gradebook*?”

Rippert looked at me, beginning to understand his position. He waited.

“You don’t keep *records*?”

“I have samples of their work in my office. And I’ve asked them to keep everything in a portfolio. At the end of the semester I’ll read it all one more time.”

I laughed. “Isn’t that a *huge* amount of needless *work* for you?”

That was not exactly what I’d meant to say. He was waiting again, now with an expression of wonderment. I did not want to see any more of his expressions. Outside the plate glass I saw the baseball player’s head bobbing, his sport-shoed feet beside the keyboard. His eyes were closed, his lips moved, and his arms were spread in an unusual position, one curled hand moving as if he were scratching his stomach with a knitting needle, the other arm extended.

“Dahlia Flowers has suggested that you might be relating to her on other than a professional level, Mr. Rippert.”

This was not strictly true, as her actual complaint had so far addressed only the rudeness I was so familiar with from the litany, but the potential was so obvious to me that I was afraid Rippert wouldn’t see it unless I put it directly to him. No matter that the threat was in direct opposition to what I’d just worried about; Rippert was trouble from any perspective. From my pencil drawer I took the paper Dahlia had left with

me -- not the original, which I'd safely filed, but the copy I'd had Karen make for this interview. "What a Miracle I Was," it was entitled.

Rippert glanced at it.

"Yep," he said, apparently meaning some combination of *Yes, I recognize it, that's my student's paper, that's my handwriting* -- which, when I flipped the page over, began "Miracle you were and treat you are, Dahlia." A full wobbly paragraph followed. My fingernail flicked slightly against the paper, I was trembling so -- not from fear, in spite of that gruesome bumpy skull, but from that urgent desire to do this correctly.

"Yep," he said again. "So?"

Now *I* was waiting.

"*Treat you are?*" I finally shouted at him despite myself. In peripheral vision I saw the baseball player's long legs swivel down from the front desk.

"Look. I've been telling her the same thing all semester. Dahlia's not illiterate, but you can't just spill out your life on the page and call it art. Language doesn't work that way. Even if these kids never write another word as long as they live, I want them to leave my class with a little respect for the endeavor."

In truth, with his last word my own respect level went up a little, for the man's vocabulary if not for the man himself.

"But 'treat you are,' Bob? How is that appropriate?"

Somehow my groundwork was having an unexpected effect. For a split second there I'd thought I could reach him, make him see some principle that in one fell swoop would end all the complaints altogether. It was like taking pity on a hopeless student, which hadn't happened to me in a while. Luckily, the feeling didn't last long.

"I was being sarcastic," Rippert said. "Read the rest of the note."

Well, there you go! Sarcasm is a charge itself, not a defense! What an idiot! Dahlia Flowers was no Nell, but she was attractive, one of the first girls I'd seen on campus that spring without hose, and her little turned-up nose with a barely perceptible spray of freckles across it and an ever-present flush to her cheeks were more than enough to predispose any judge or jury to find some merit in any charge she made about a professor's excessive attention. "You're a treat!" Why didn't

he just jot down his phone number below her grade -- which, by the way, was a C, so question asked and answered.

“I’d like your response in writing, Mr. Rippert.”

He blinked. Then the eyes behind the huge lenses crinkled.

“Response to what, exactly?”

I had it all typed up for him.

“Any particular deadline, Merle?”

The eyes crinkled, one actually more than the other: a wink. Excessive chumminess when the rent comes due, the oldest trick in the book. Nine months of personnel management and already I was a pro. Rippert saw his best way out in getting me to understand that *he* understood I was just doing my job.

“The end of the semester,” I said, “will be fine.”

Before then, of course, other things happened. The most calamitous was that our search collapsed. Our first candidate turned us down, our second withdrew before we could make an offer, and our third choice, who was really substandard anyway, jumped out of an airplane with an improperly packed chute the weekend before our second interviews. Meanwhile, Samantha Rollins was slapped by a boy in her Chaucer to Renaissance and quit. Even before, she’d told Mary that in twenty-five years at St. Alban’s she’d never endured such abuse. Mary herself came down with strep, so I had to raise up two adjuncts in a hurry before the whole Backgrounds program went down the tubes. This time I was more careful: I actually went into 203C and *looked* at them before I had Karen draw their contracts up. And when I heard Fred’s voice in the mailroom, I began shutting my door. Rippert’s students still dropped by with fair regularity, and I still listened, but I didn’t hear anything more useful than the “treat” remark.

Still, by finals week he hadn’t turned in the report I’d requested yet. When our paths had crossed, we’d nodded, frosty but polite enough. But I did hear his bellow less, and as the weather got warmer I noticed he’d changed his corduroy Bermudas for some regular Madras and his logging boots for a pair of leather sandals that must have looked respectable only a few years before. And his hair had grown to a point where he looked less like an escaped mental patient than like a spring bud on some bush, still not quite human but healthy, at least.

Finally, on the last day to turn grades in, during the last hour before Karen was to take them over to the registrar, Rippert comes in with his. Usually it's Karen who checks the bubble work -- sometimes the form doesn't fit the printout correctly and it's easy to skip a line -- but I'd asked her to send Rippert in to me when he came in with his sheets. He was wearing a sailor's cap with a downturned brim and several fishing lures stuck in it at what looked to be random spots. A triple hook hung down over one hinge of his red eyeglass frames. But I wanted to make this last move cleanly. For the first time since the visit of Eddie and Mrs. Putz, I felt a little sorry for the guy.

"Going fishing, Robert?"

I held out my hand for his grade sheets, and he passed them over, the triple hook swinging like a lantern in the hold of a ship.

"Me?" he said finally. "Naw."

So much for pity. The regulation against private firearms in public buildings must have been drawn up especially for this moment. His grades were all Cs. Some plusses, some minuses, a few Bs and Ds and one A -- this is out of four sections, mind you. I hadn't been keeping track, but I was sure they were the lowest grades in the department. It had been forty years since I'd given grades so low; I went through the sheets again and spotted two Fs.

"Those two quit coming," he said with his infuriating timing. I flipped the gradesheets into my out basket.

"Where's my report, Rippert?" *Report?* he was going to ask with an innocence that might have done me in, so I added, "The report about Dahlia Flowers."

"Oh, Dahlia."

He *relaxed*. He *grinned*.

"Dahlia Flowers. Miracle. Treat. What you have to say for yourself."

He *sat down*.

"She was four pounds something when she was born," he said. "She fit in the palm of her mother's hand. She wrote down what her mother told her -- the labor pains, the trip to the hospital, the weeks in an incubator -- and turned it in as nonfiction, with a PS about her source. 'Some of the above I didn't learn until I was much older.' She's a sweet kid, and like I told you she's not illiterate, but I'm glad I'll never

have to read about her life again. Her boyfriend's name is Thom."

He spelled it. But I was reminded of our first talk on the matter, which he seemed to have remembered in more detail than I did, and I realized something else. Dahlia hadn't complained again. At first I felt relief, then panic as I thought of the worst: he'd seduced her. He'd bribed her. He'd -- though surely I'd have heard it on local news -- *killed* her. I looked at the sheet for her section. Beside "Flowers, Dahlia," the "C" bubble had been shinily filled in.

Rippert's hand was out. He was on his feet, milky eyes squinting.

"Good bye, Merle. Thanks for the job. What are the chances for next year, do you think?"

Reluctantly, I took the hand. "Very," I said, composing my face in suitable manner, "Very, very slim."

He wouldn't let go, so I walked him to the door like that. When I opened, Karen was standing over the baseball player's shoulder. They'd been laughing, but at the sudden appearance of the two of us holding hands they froze, their mouths open. What I did then made me feel better than I'd felt in months.

"Son," I said as the athlete swung his feet off the front desk. I'd forgotten his name. "Will you please show Mr. Rippert out? Thank you."

And then I went back in my office and closed my door.

The cruelest month is not April but June, I learned as chair, the month of final- grade contention. Every day, whether by phone or post or email or actual visit from student or parents or other relatives, including some cousins with shirts darker than their ties, I learned something else. Samantha Rollins had made as if to slap the boy first. Mary ate those little crackers shaped like goldfish when she taught, and she never offered any around. Several of the adjuncts had simply announced that they weren't getting paid enough to agonize and let their students pick their own grades; the astounding thing was that the resultant curves weren't off by much. Caldwell Harding, whose seminar was scheduled until nine, was usually fast asleep by eight. So-and-so mumbled. So-and-so spit. Assignments weren't fair. Teachers played favorites or wore distracting clothes. One kid's father claimed

his son had failed *The Epic* because of the seams in Mary's nylons. He was a teacher himself, eighth-grade biology, and he'd brought me articles and photocopies of textbooks to inform me of the extent to which thoughts of sex can intrude upon the mind of an eighteen-year-old boy, as if maybe I had somehow skipped that year myself. And June was also the month in which the dean called me in to make his formal request for me to serve another year as interim chair, a not entirely unexpected request. Nor, judging from his face, was my answer, a humble "OK, fine, I'll do it, thank you."

So we were into July before it struck me -- in bed one night, with Suzanne drawing up a guest list for a picnic on Bastille Day -- that in the whole previous month I had not received a single communication, not one complaint, about Robert Rippert, since end of term.

"Isn't that funny?" I said, looking over at Suzy. We were both against the backboard in our tricolor sleeping caps, a heat spell having just broken. I wear mine like a beret, but she pulls hers down over her ears, the way she says the patriots wore theirs. At any rate, she agreed it was funny about Rippert, since she knew him almost as well as I did, from my conversation at the dinner table.

"Maybe they liked him, finally," she suggested after adding another name to her list (the Whalburtons, Edie and Ernie, from History, which got our line when that guy from Princeton quit, but I said OK. Ours is a big yard). "Maybe he taught them something."

"Don't be ridiculous," I said, but even I could tell that my voice lacked conviction. And over the next couple of weeks I got, first, a letter from Margo Banks, postmarked from a Carmelite monastery in Los Angeles, asking me to forward to Rippert a sealed envelope in which she said was a request for his recommendation for an application for readmission. Second, an e-mail from one HONKERDONKER84 (né Eddie Putz), another request, this one to me, for information on the best course of study for someone who, like himself, was "enthused about writing but admit I'm not quite ready for greatness yet, as Mr. Robin Ripley finely convinced me of." And, just as I was hanging up the phone from a call with the dean in which he released next year's discretionary funding, Karen appeared with a shoe box she said somebody had left on the doorstep, knocked the knocker, and then vanished. Inside was a small stuffed dog, a terrier of some sort, with a bright

red tongue made of felt. And stuck to its manufacturer's label was a Post-It that read, in even rounder handwriting than Margo Banks's, "Dear Proffesor Ripper. Bow wow. Love, your Delta Sig girls. You'll meet some of our sisters next year."

So on Bastille Day, once again, I made my phone calls while Suzy was tying ribbons around the silverware: red for knives, white for forks, blue for spoons. Harris wasn't home, but I left a message. Samantha Rollins took a good bit of talk, but she agreed to come back. "Robert," I said when he picked up. "What are you doing in the Fall?"

There was a silence, during which I imagined him untangling a fishing lure from electrical wire, perhaps, or adding a twiggy word to a poem he'd been jotting on the back of an envelope. Then I heard the mirth.

"I don't know," he said. "I was just wondering. Working for you, maybe, Merle. Do you think?"

Well, I winced, but I sent him the contract, and he's been one of us ever since.