The Clearing

Diana Lindblom*
I can't believe it's over,” was all I could think. It kept me from thinking about how chilled my hands were through the holes in my mittens, even though I had sunk them deep into the pockets of my ski jacket. It sure seemed cold for November, and I wondered what wonderful things January and February had in store for me. But it made me feel better—warmer, just to keep repeating in my mind, “It's all over. This damn quarter's finally over.”

I had just finished with my last final exam. Don't ask me what it was about—I couldn't have told you then any better than I could now. I remember glancing over the essay question and writing on, endlessly, the biggest bunch of BS you have ever heard. But then sometimes they like that. Write something, write a lot, and sound halfway intelligent, and they'll hurriedly scrawl B + on the top so they can get to the next one and get those damn grades in on time. Then they can start on that novel they've always been wanting to write, or whatever it is they do. Maybe they do what I do, just sitting for a week in front of the TV, letting the blood seep down from my brain into the rest of my body, enjoying the emptiness.

It was just my luck to have a final on the last day, during the last two-hour period. It didn't surprise me a bit—why should the end of the quarter be any different from the rest of it, I thought. Now as I walked across campus, I felt a little strange as I did at the end of every quarter, knowing I was done, but feeling kind of anti-climactic.

A barrenness had settled in on the campus, and I had the entire stretch of sidewalk to myself, which usually had served as a miniature highway for the feet of human hordes. Grey sky and grey buildings were in front of me. Grey—that was the color. The end of the quarter made you feel grey; not black like the way you feel when you are sure that
there's no way you can read five hundred pages in two days, and you know it's your own fault because you didn't start the book at the beginning of the quarter like you should have, but damn it, the subject matter was so deadly dull that you couldn't force yourself to sit down for an hour and plow through even a chapter at a time.

And you didn't feel white, like the way you feel after a few days' rest, when your mind is clear again, after you've primed the pump for the next quarter, and you find out that she didn't give you a D after all, which is a good thing since it was a required course. No, grey was something in between those. You were just neutral, not really feeling one way or the other—just not feeling. Some people said I got too wrapped up in school. I wondered if I was the only one; if I was, I couldn't help it. I always ended up feeling the same way every quarter, no matter how hard I tried to combat it.

I walked no faster than I had to in order to keep warm. I wished I was on my way back to the dorm, but I still had some unfinished business to take care of. I could have gone all day without that phone call from Rosenberg that morning. "Miss Cain, I'd like to speak with you sometime today if I could. I think you probably know what it's about. I'm glad to have caught you before you left for vacation. I'll be in my office all day."

Yes, I knew what it was about. I don't know what had made me believe I could get away with handing in someone else's paper for that last assignment. I'd never done anything like that before, but it hadn't seemed like such a bad idea at the time, when I considered all the pressure I was under. In fact, it had seemed like a way of getting back at everything and everybody. So why hadn't I known it would boomerang? I mean, it just naturally fell in line with everything else that had been happening. But anyway, I did it, with little time to sit and brood over the ethical considerations of it all.

I knew what kind of masterpieces the rest of the grade-grubbing class would probably turn in. They always sat there so attentively, looking so interested, when I knew they
were just as bored as I was. I didn't bother to stifle my yawns, and I even rested my chin in my hand. Once in awhile someone would ask some complex question which would make them appear so intelligent, and Rosenberg would frown for a moment and straighten his glasses, glaring intently at the lectern in front of him until he came up with an equally impressive answer. Well, I didn't have time to be intelligent, and so I typed my name on the top of a friend's paper.

Frankly, I didn't really care what Rosenberg thought of me as I walked across campus to his office. I supposed he would fail me, but even that didn't matter to me then. I had squeaked by and fared pretty well in all my other classes, so I knew even an F couldn't totally ruin me. But I just hoped he wouldn't yell at me. I didn't know what kind of a temper this man had, or how he reacted to situations like this one. And besides that, he was Jewish. Being the cloistered, corn-fed midwesterner that I was, I had never known any Jews until coming to college. "I wonder if they are supposed to be hot-tempered," I thought. "Or is that the Irish?"

He hadn't sounded angry on the phone that morning, but then he probably knew that I wouldn't come if I thought he was angry. Maybe he was saving that for later. "Please—please just don't yell at me," I thought to myself. "That's all I ask. I couldn't cope with that right now."

Carmichael Hall was said to be a condemned building. If it wasn't, it should have been. It was somehow held together by the crumbling red bricks which also formed the spires and cupolas of the top of the building—it was a haven for the pigeons. I remember seeing Old Carmichael in pictures from back when the university was founded. It seemed as if its existence on the campus would go forever unquestioned.

As I opened the heavy wooden door of the building, I was met with the familiar old and musty smell of the inside. The antique radiators were hissing, and as usual it was unbearably warm within. Rosenberg's office was somewhere on the second floor, though I wasn't quite sure
where. I climbed the worn and hollow-sounding wooden stairs and hoped he had gotten tired of waiting and had gone home. But as I reached the top of the stairs, I knew I was out of luck. He stood at the drinking fountain, holding his pipe in one hand as he pushed the knob with the other. He saw me out of the corner of his eye and held up one finger to acknowledge me as he slurped from the fountain.

"Miss Cain—come on in," he spoke, and led me to his office down the hall. His heavy body imposed itself upon the warped floorboards, and they creaked their complaint with each step. I followed behind and wondered how long this would take. My ride home was leaving at 5:30. I glanced at my watch, discreetly.

"Please sit down," he urged, and offered me a rather dilapidated cane-bottom rocking chair. His eye evidently caught my puzzled expression, and he explained, "That chair was my grandfather's. My wife won't have it in the house—you see, all our furniture is modern—so I keep it up here, where it's appreciated."

"I see. It's very... nice."

He was by this time already engrossed in the drawer of his filing cabinet. "Hmm? What is?" He turned around.

"Uh, the chair. I said it's very nice."

"Oh—yes, yes. Thank you." He pushed the drawer shut and placed a paper on his desk. It was mine. He opened the window a crack, and I noticed a bird feeder outside on the window sill.

"It's always so confounded hot in here. Well," he sat down at his desk, "let's talk about your paper. It was a very good paper, you know."

I shrugged nonchalantly. He laughed slightly and said, "You don't have to be modest about it. I know you didn't write it."

I didn't blush or even blink. I just waited—waited for whatever was to come.

The pipe was in his mouth now, and he sucked on the mouthpiece as he lit the tobacco in the bowl.

"Do you want an explanation?" I offered.
He shook the match, extinguishing it. "Well, I don't really require one in these cases, unless of course you feel the need to expiate yourself."

I decided my explanation wouldn't sound like a good one—not to him anyway—so I offered nothing more. He was watching me, and I noticed a slight smile on his lips, partly hidden by the stem of his pipe.

"You might be interested in knowing that I'd read this paper two years ago, when it was turned in by its original author. It was turned in to Dr. Boyle, who was then my officemate. He wanted me to read it because he found it to be such an extraordinary piece of work. And I agreed with him—it was."

I hadn't figured on anything like that happening. Who couldn've known? I shifted in my chair and it began to rock, back and forth.

"So, tell me, Miss Cain, will you be going home for vacation?"

I nodded.

"Good. Then you'll have plenty of time to write your paper."

I opened my mouth and started to speak, but he interrupted.

"I'm giving you an Incomplete until your paper is turned in and marked. I'd appreciate it if you would get it to me as soon as possible."

"Isn't the procedure usually a plain and simple F for the course?" I asked.

He smiled. "You didn't think you were going to get off that easy, did you? You're going to write that paper, because I know you have something to say about the subject, whatever your reasons were for not writing it in the first place."

He opened a desk drawer and produced a bag of corn and sunflower seeds. He walked to the window and opened it wider, dropping handfuls of seed into the feeder.

"You know, your work from earlier in the quarter was actually quite interesting," he said as he turned around
Sketch

toward me. "Since you are quiet for the most part during class, I want to give you the extra chance to express yourself on paper."

He sat down at his desk again and leaned back in his chair. "I don't like quarter breaks," he said through a puff of smoke. "I usually end up watching too much TV and have to come up here to get away."

"You watch TV?" I blurted out, almost before realizing what I was saying.

He laughed. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, I just thought you—"

"You thought I would have banned it from the premises. Well, I probably should have. I'll have to admit my weakness there. But anyway, as I was saying, this place is kind of like a refuge for me, even though I spend nearly every minute of daylight here, working or at least trying to look like I am."

He mused to himself for a moment. I noticed the pigeons outside the window. It was so conspicuously silent throughout the entire building that I couldn't imagine him coming there during break. I sat still, just listening, as he seemed to be doing also. I guess I became kind of hypnotized by the silence and watching the birds feed outside the window. As soon as I realized I had been sitting that way for some time, I straightened up, a little embarrassed, and glanced over to see if Rosenberg had been watching.

"Guess I've got the burnt-out blues," I apologized. But he was in his own trance, it seemed, his eyes fixed on the wall before him, his gaze cutting perpendicular across mine. He became alert as I spoke.

"Well, Miss Cain," he said, removing his coat and muffler from a hook on the wall, "would you care to join me for a cup of coffee before leaving for home, or I suppose you would prefer beer?"

I stood up, glancing at my watch. "No, coffee would be fine, and I'd like to, but my ride will be leaving pretty soon, so I'd better go back and get my things together."

He nodded, wrapping the muffler around his neck and tucking it inside the collar of his coat.
"Thank you," I added.

He turned out the lights and locked the door as we walked out of the office. We walked down the stairs and out of the main doors of Old Carmichael. I was headed back towards the dorm, and he was headed in the opposite direction towards the parking lot. The wind was stronger now, and I shivered inside the brittle shell of my ski jacket.

"Well, have a good vacation, and I’ll be looking for that paper when you get back," he told me as he left. I stood for a moment, watching him as he went, a stoop-shouldered figure in a grey overcoat, with a lightness in his step that seemed incongruous with his bulk and age. The pigeons were circling above him, trying to find on the roof of Old Carmichael a warm place in which to nestle for the evening. I pulled my collar up around my neck and started across campus, a little sorry that already the quarter had ended.

One

by
Glen Pickus
Urban Planning 3

I was born, am alive, and will die.
of identical Stuff are We;
from the Whole We All emerge
as I am You are Me.

from my eyes the tears do fall
as the Whale is drowned
and the Baby starved.
All is One is God.

each Creation I defend
as parts of my own Self.
in All, I can exult.
I am God is You.