

Post-Graduate Stress Disorder by Chris Boette

I lit my Lucky Strike as the broad leveled her gat at my heart. “Are you ready to die, Mr. Elliot?”

I took a cool drag from the cigarette and replied while smoke danced out of my nose. “Only if you’re ready to go to bed with me.” She didn’t look amused. The bullet that exited the barrel didn’t look too amused either.”

“Hold on,” Professor Mendelssohn said, motioning for Stephanie to stop reading from the hand out. Larry sank in his chair as his advisor and supervisor started.

“This piece of literary *hackery* that I have photocopied for the class was written, in fact, by someone in this room.”

A student or two gasped.

“Yes,” Mendelssohn continued, his thinning white hair dancing with every movement of his head, “I know that it’s hard to grasp, much less believe, but it pains me to reiterate this fact: One of you students, one of you bright, gifted, *exceptional* people has decided to waste his—or her—time by writing this and waste my time by forcing me to read it. Although I wasn’t really forced to read it; someone dropped it off in my box. Some unnamed coward....”

Mendelssohn gaze fixed the poster of Robert Frost on the wall behind his teaching assistant. Larry tried to sink in his chair even farther, but stopped when he noticed that his eyes were level with the edge of the round table that the class shared. He was uncertain how his story had gotten to the professor’s box, but the man had it now and had only just started to eviscerate it. Mendelssohn cleared his throat, readjusted his glasses and gray bow tie, and continued.

“I have given all of you a copy of this piece with the name blacked out. And, please, save

yourselves the time of trying to read the name under the marker; you won't be able to. I blacked the name out and then made photocopies, which you all now possess, before incinerating the original document. This method of anonymization is foolproof. The Federal Government uses it on a daily basis and we all know just how indefatigable they are. And before any of you ask, I did this so we could focus on the text, as opposed to the obviously misguided author." Mendelssohn's eyes rested on Larry's forehead. "And, of course, to spare the author the embarrassment of having his—or her—work..." Mendelssohn paused for a moment, obviously searching for the most provocative word, "*exposed* to the class." Larry dropped his gaze and sighed, while Mendelssohn rocked back and forth on his heels, apparently quite pleased with himself.

"Now," he boomed. "Any opening thoughts?" Larry sighed again.

Sanders raised his hand. Sanders, that undergrad who was always just leaving Mendelssohn's office every single time that Larry had gone there. Sanders, who most likely loved capital-L Literature more than his own mother. "Uh, yeah, one of the things I had a problem with, I mean, besides all the typical stuff, is the main character's name. I mean, when I hear the name 'Elliot,' I think of that TV show *Get A Life*." Sanders, the student with infinitely more heart than brains. "I mean, that doesn't seem like a good, um, association. Especially with the whole tough-guy act." A few students nodded and some grunted in agreement.

Larry, slouched in his chair, wished for a gas-line-eruption-turned-mass-poisoning. Or a fire alarm. Or even, he decided, a 747 plowing right into the administration building, or any campus building, just so he could leave without further degradation.

"Anyone else have any thoughts? How about Larry, your beloved TA? What do you think?" Mendelssohn asked from between teeth clenched in a grin. "This rubbish surfaced on your watch. Would you like to have the honor of sending it back to the depths of noir hell from which it was spewed?"

Writing his own piece of detective fiction seemed like a fun exercise. Larry had intended to have the students emulate the piece as an assignment for the supplementary section he taught for Professor Mendelssohn's capital-L Literature course. He wanted them to understand for themselves the contrast between capital-L Literature and genre fiction by getting into the inner workings of the dribble. Ultimately, though, he figured one of his students would rat him out for tainting the class and Mendelssohn would have words with him in the office. Larry was ready for that. But this sort of private torture in front of the whole class was not something that he had foreseen. A lashing with with cat-of-nine-tails Mendelssohn kept on the wall in his office or maybe even outright public humiliation, but not this private belittling in front of everyone.

Larry found himself unable to respond to Mendelssohn's prodding in any way other than silence. And with each additional pair of students' eyes turning to him for a response, Larry fell deeper into thoughtlessness.

"Well, my boy?"

Finally, under pressure, Larry's thoughts began to thaw. "Well, I'm not even sure where to begin. I mean, there's just so much," Larry cringed slightly, but enough for Mendelssohn to notice, "*wrong* with it."

To see Larry wince when describing his own work in front of the class seemingly brought Mendelssohn unimaginable joy, that sort of joy that turns into gasoline in the internal combustion engine of spite.

"How about we begin with the fact that this is a capital-L Literature course, Larry? How about we begin with the fact that there is nothing but cliché after cliché in this piece—'She was the kind of dame who would break your heart, or maybe your arms,' 'The answer hit me like a .44 slug,' 'I pounded her like a jackhammer'?! How about we begin with the fact that this reads like it was written by an absinthe-soaked screenwriter seventy years ago in Hollywood? How about we start with *that*, Larry?"

At this point, Mendelssohn was screaming at the sky, waving his index finger at the gods, hoping to affect them with his cries. Larry looked around at the students, their eyes all fixated on the finger, their jaws hanging open slightly, heathens entranced by the pleas of their priest.

When Mendelssohn had finished, his eyes were still angled up at the ceiling and he was breathing heavily. Larry lowered his head and Sanders, that boot licker, began to clap slowly. Another person joined in, followed by another and another, until Larry and Mendelssohn were the only ones not applauding. Under cover of hands slapping against each other, Larry stooped to the ground, retrieved his bag, and slunk out of the room, while Mendelssohn was still drinking in the applause.

At around eight the next morning, Larry was awoken by the sound of someone scraping the front walk of his apartment building. The noise reverberated on the inside of his skull. Larry shuttered and pulled his pillow over his head, trying to block the sound out. Unsuccessful, Larry stumbled out of bed and pulled on a tattered hoodie. He scooped up the nearly empty pack of Lucky Strikes from his nightstand and sat at the table on the other side of his efficiency. He sat there, staring at the calendar nailed to the wall opposite him. Outside, snow fell listlessly from the sky. He looked at the heading for the month: April.

Fuck.

He shivered as he lit his last cigarette. Mechanically inhaling drag after drag, he studied the six dates circled in red: due dates for job applications. Two had already passed and the applications still sat in a pile next to him. Taking the last drag, Larry walked to the kitchen and deposited the spent cigarette in the trashcan and the empty pack among a dozen others in a cardboard box he had labeled, MONEY WELL SPENT, YOU DUMMY.

Upon opening the fridge, his senses of smell and vision were assaulted. The milk had

spoiled and somehow spilled all over the bottom shelf of the fridge, only to be absorbed by a pizza box afflicted with what had maybe once been part of a sausage pie. Together, the remains formed an unholy slush that had started to grow what appeared to be toes. Larry slammed fridge the door shut and left for the corner store.

The sound of ice, snow, gravel, and salt crunching beneath his boots provided Larry with a new sound to meditate as he walked. Thoughts of Mendelssohn, sleep, capital-L Literature, employment, and graduation flowed through his mind like run-off cutting paths through snow. Part of Larry wanted to think about all of these things in a serious manner, but the fear of being overwhelmed overwhelmed that impulse.

Larry arrived at the store and entered while a woman held the door for him. He walked past her without making any sort of gesture of forced gratitude. Although he heard her huff, he didn't react in any way; he was too absorbed in not thinking his thoughts to worry.

He drifted down the aisles, grabbing only prefabricated food. There was a time, many years ago when Larry was an undergrad, that he cooked nearly every meal from scratch and rigorously inspected every ingredient. But, he began to grow tired of the constant vigilance and, he had slowly realized, tired of caring. Not only about what he put into his body, but what went on around him. Watching himself transition to graduate school with an ease that was unexpected, Larry felt powerless in his own life. Continuing school was the path of least resistance, so he took it. Even though it only delayed the inevitable transition to the real world, it only occasionally made him miserable.

Grabbing the just-add-water-and-microwave-you-lazy-bastard macaroni and cheese, Larry felt a presence looming behind him. He decided to ignore it and sidestepped to the red-goop-barely-passing-for-ketchup. But this movement didn't shake the feeling. He sensed it moving closer as a droplet of sweat rolled down the back of his neck. A hand dropped on his shoulder and Larry closed his eyes, trying to will away any sort of social interaction. He just

wanted to be left alone.

“Larry, my boy. How are you?” His instinctual responses ran the gamut from screaming to fainting to running away. Or just. Standing. Perfectly. Still.

The voice persisted and the hand turned him around. Larry’s eyes met with Mendelssohn’s bow tie, red today.

“Purchasing some vittles, eh?” Mendelssohn chuckled. Larry wasn’t certain how to respond. So he didn’t. Mendelssohn pulled Larry closer to him and positioned his hooked nose mere inches away from Larry’s.

“Now, Larry, I know you’re a smart boy. Quite smart, in fact. Brilliant? Perhaps, but I’m not certain. Genius? Probably not. What are you doing after you graduate?”

Larry opened his mouth to answer but was cut off by Mendelssohn.

“Obviously, that was a rhetorical question. You’re ambitious. I like that. How about I buy you coffee?” Mendelssohn started pulling the groceries from Larry’s grip and putting them back on the shelves randomly.

“Well, I—” Larry started.

“Another rhetorical question. Let’s go.” And with that, Mendelssohn dragged Larry from the store by his arm.

Fighting off fears of kidnapping and abduction, Larry tried to figure out why Mendelssohn was treating the TA that he had humiliated the day before to coffee. And why so forcefully? Larry’s imagination inserted the idea that Mendelssohn may have an urgent job offer to make, a job that required minimal work with maximum benefits. A job that offered the opportunity for exotic travels and even more exotic relaxation. Maybe this job would afford Larry the opportunity to start a novel, or maybe even—

They had stopped suddenly in front of a bar. Mendelssohn went to open the door, at which point Larry managed to form some words of protest.

“But, Professor Mendel—”

“Oh, I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking that a bar wouldn’t be open at nine in the morning. But it’s fine.” He looked back at Larry and grinned. “They know me.” He pushed the door open and Larry followed, the nonsensical hopes his imagination had formed starting to take root.

Larry paused at the entrance while Mendelssohn sauntered up to the empty bar. A scraggly woman with faded tattoos on her biceps came out of the back room and, upon seeing the two guests, began to fill the coffeemaker with water. Mendelssohn leaned over to the bartender, they spoke in low tones. Larry paused for a moment, giving them the privacy that they obviously desired. Their short conversation ended with Mendelssohn kissing the woman forcefully. The bartender then went back to the coffee, seemingly unaware that she had just been kissed. Mendelssohn reached over the bar and squeezed her ass before turning to Larry and motioning for him to sit on the stool next to him. Larry cautiously climbed onto his perch and cocked his head so that he could keep Mendelssohn and the unresponsive bartender in his view.

“Now, Larry, ju— look at me Larry, right here, look at me.” Mendelssohn motioned to his eyes with his fingers in a V. Larry focused on Mendelssohn’s glowing green eyes, hideously distorted by his glasses lenses. He could no longer see the bartender.

“Now, Larry— are you looking at me? Good. Now, Larry, just be honest with me: Do you like me?” Larry hesitated for a moment, waiting for Mendelssohn to exclaim that the question was, in fact, rhetorical. Another moment passed and Larry still waited. Finally, he decided that this question was asked with the intention of receiving an answer.

“Well, Professor Mendel—”

“Two Mendelssohn coffees.” The bartender dropped two mugs of coffee onto the bar in front of the patrons.

“Thank you, Martha,” Mendelssohn replied, his eyes still on Larry.

“No problem. Just remember to settle up before you leave this time, alright?” the bartender wheezed.

“Yes, of course, my dear,” he replied, spoken again without eye contact. Martha stood for a moment and then drifted away to the back room.

“Well, Professor,” Larry started again, unsure of what sort of interview this could be.

“Hold on. First, we must drink.” Mendelssohn took his eyes off Larry, which relieved the younger man immensely. Mendelssohn picked up his mug and, with his eyes, motioned for Larry to do the same. He acquiesced.

“A toast.”

“A toast?”

“To...the future!” Mendelssohn boomed.

“The future,” Larry repeated, lacking any of the enthusiasm Mendelssohn possessed. The men clinked their mugs together and while Larry sipped, Mendelssohn chugged. When he put his mug down, three-quarters empty, Mendelssohn let out an exuberant sigh.

“Delicious.”

Larry sipped some more of the coffee, trying to identify its sweetness.

“Professor Mendelssohn, what’s in this?”

“Never mind that, my boy, now, do you like me or not?”

“Not,” Larry blurted. Instantly he felt the color disappear from his face and then return twice multiplied. Larry’s confusion gave way to the realization that this conversation was flying in the face of every book he had read on dummies scoring jobs. At least, he reasoned, he had been given a free coffee, even though it had been laced with some sort of liqueur.

“Ha ha!” Mendelssohn cheered. “I knew it was a good idea to get some coffee. Now that we have that out on the table, I want to employ you after you graduate, provided you satisfy all

requirements, of course.”

“But, what about what I just said? Although I really do need a job, even if it’s working for you and your capital-L Literature department,” Larry blabbered. He felt his thoughts, previously frozen in glacial form, melting into a river that flowed out of his mouth. “Besides, Professor Mendelssohn, I don’t even like you.”

“That’s fine, my boy. I don’t like you either. Not at all. But, I respect you. That’s how we can create the ideal employer-employee relationship.”

“But, / don’t respect you,” Larry said, continuing his unabashed honesty.

“Bravo, Larry, brav-o! I don’t respect you, either. That was simply a test. A test that you passed marvelously. Much more marvelously than any test you passed in any of my classes,” Mendelssohn reflected momentarily.

Larry could do nothing but stutter at this point. His thoughts fell apart, icebergs plummeting into the sea of despair. A warmth passed through his body. and a haze enveloped everything in his vision save Mendelssohn, who was grinning sadistically.

“Well, my boy?” Mendelssohn’s voice echoed in Larry’s ears. “What do you say?”

“Ugh,” Larry said. His eyelids tumbled shut and his head fell to the bar with a thud.

The buzzing of fluorescent lights drilled its way into Larry’s head. He opened one eye and then the other. His head pounded in time with his pulse. He sat up slowly and knocked his head on the steel crossbar that supported the bunk above his bed. He fell back to the pillow and groaned. Larry looked around his room, confused because he didn’t remember redecorating it. He looked at the bare concrete walls, the mangy mattress he sat upon, the bars on the windows, the green shag carpet....

“Bars?!” Larry leaped up in a panic, hitting his head again on the same crossbar. The steel door at the opposite end of the room swung open and Mendelssohn strode into the cell.

“Larry, my boy. How do you do?” He greeted the prisoner with an extended hand. Larry shook it cautiously, while rubbing the dent in his skull. “I hope this change in scenery hasn’t startled you too terribly. I’m afraid that these are the standard dormitories for all of our new employees.” Mendelssohn inspected the room as he spoke, observing the mold growing in the corners. “Anyway, I brought you some cigarettes. Lucky Strikes, if I remember correctly.”

Larry looked at his offering and reached for the sealed pack that Mendelssohn held out.

“Do you have any matches?” Larry asked as he packed the smokes.

“But of course I do,” Mendelssohn replied cheerily. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a blank white book. Larry reached for it, but Mendelssohn pulled the matches away.

“I’m afraid that, per regulations, one of your superiors must strike a match or ignite a lighter for you.” Larry slowly opened the pack, put a cigarette in his mouth, and stood shakily. Mendelssohn struck the match and brought the flame to his subordinate.

“Well, if that’s all, I’ll be on my way now.” Mendelssohn bowed mockingly and turned to leave.

“Wait!” Larry cried, almost dropping the cigarette from his lips. “What is this place? What am I doing here? Do I have a roommate? Does he snore?”

“Ah, yes, questions you have for the answers I possess,” Mendelssohn said.

“What?”

“This place,” Mendelssohn continued, “is the last bastion of capital-L Literature. Since before the invention of the radio, capital-L Literature has been in a losing battle for the hearts and minds of people everywhere. The battle has only become more fierce with new media gaining ground at an alarming rate. Our enemies have grown in number—television, Facebook, smart phones,” Mendelssohn narrowed his eyes at Larry, “mass-market paperbacks.”

Mendelssohn plopped down on the bunk while Larry stood, the cigarette burning in his motionless mouth. “We’ve tried to give capital-L Literature a boost through all of the

conventional means: Madison Avenue marketing, bribed scientists, setting up Oil-for-capital-L-Literature programs with Middle East despots. Sadly, we've been unsuccessful. Within the last fifteen years, and with the popularization of the internet, we've had to resort to more," Mendelssohn paused for the full effect, "*aggressive* tactics."

"Like what?" Larry whispered, afraid of the answer.

"Bombings, kidnappings, assassinations. We've even tried setting up pro-capital-L Literature dictatorships in Central America, but they always get overthrown by Communists. Goddamn illiterate reds." Mendelssohn spit on the shag carpet in disgust.

Larry continued sucking on his cigarette, unsure of what to ask next, but Mendelssohn knew what else needed to be explained.

"As to why you're here, well, I felt that you owed us after your constant negligence and the passe attitude you have exhibited throughout your graduate school career. That trash you submitted in class sealed the deal, as it were. Think of your participation as penance."

Larry dropped his cigarette. It melted some strands of the shag together before going out.

"You...you mean that I'm captive? That I'm here against my will?"

Mendelssohn looked up at the trembling man-child. "Think of it as you're here as part of *my* will. Now, there'd be a problem if you were here against my will. That would be most disturbing. Thank goodness that's not the case." Mendelssohn shook his head. "Most disturbing."

Larry's legs shook for a moment before buckling. He fell in a pile next to his cigarette butt and began to weep.

"Now, now, my boy, you don't have to do all that. I know that you're excited. Don't have shed tears of joy for my sake. I'll light you another cigarette and then let you get some sleep. After your training and re-education (please overlook the looming connotations of that word, my boy; there really isn't a more appropriate phrase), you'll be assigned to the Matt Groening case.

One of our operatives botched a hit on him a few years ago and Rupert Murdoch sent him into hiding. Protecting his assets, that Aussie bastard. Anyway, we have his location narrowed down to seven or eight possible suburbs.” Mendelssohn stood slowly, making sure to avoid the bunk’s steel crossbar, lit a cigarette, and placed it in Larry’s down-turned mouth.

“Get some rest, my boy. You have a greater purpose now.”