

60. The Student Body

The body. What an evocative word. I was sitting back on the overstuffed chair, sipping a cup of tea, while Colmes sipped his, trying to finish off his daily crossword. "The student body, Hobson. That's what is up for grabs," he said. "Do you not agree, Rose?"

Rose the younger sat in my wicker chair, leaning forward elbows on Colmes's desk, her chin resting on her clasped hands.

"Just whose body are you talking about, Colmes?" quipped Rose, always ready for a little spar with the master.

"Well certainly not mine," grinned Colmes (he grinned only in response to two people I have known, Rose and Rose's mom Rose the elder who had by now passed away).

"Mine is up for grabs, to the right person," I joked.

Colmes looked across to Rose, and she to me.

"You two are a couple, then?" Rose said mischievously."

"Indeed we are, but not of the body," said Colmes. "We have the perfect relationship which is that we are joined at the mind, not the body."

I must say, his good humor of the morning shined through; a most unusual event.

"Great and greater minds think alike," I added, trying to go one better.

"Well, now," said Rose the budding philosopher, "is it not a fallacy to think of the mind and body as separate entities?"

I put down my cup of tea on its saucer and leaned across to place it on Colmes's desk. I was about to announce that it was far too early in the morning to be philosophizing about imponderables such as the mind-body problem, when Colmes put aside his crossword with a flourish and announced, "we are about to face that very problem not as philosophers but as problem solvers. We will not need a philosopher to solve it. We will need clear thinking and, of course, a certain amount of manipulation, mental and otherwise."

I looked at Rose hoping she would be as puzzled as was I. And fortunately she was, though she had a big smile on her pale

Russian face, accentuated by her brightly painted red lips.

“What?” she asked.

“You may well ask, Rose,” answered Colmes. “We are about to face a mind-body problem. I am expecting my client who is vexed by this problem but does not quite know it, to arrive any minute.”

“And he is concerned about the student body? I assume you mean the body as in body corporate or something like that?” I asked showing off a little in front of Rose.

“Not quite, but you are close,” muttered Colmes.

Annoyed by Colmes’s who’s-who game, I asked, “so who is it coming? Do I know him?”

“Indeed, you do. It is Professor Maxwell Dunstan from the mathematics department.”

Rose got up from my wicker chair. “I don’t think I need stay for this.” She gathered up the cups and saucers and made her way out to the kitchen. “There’s a bit of cleaning up to do.”

“Yes, well,” smiled Colmes, “I have a little cleaning up to do with Professor Dunstan.

“He has a mind-body problem?” I asked with a silly grin.

“One might call it that,” answered Colmes.

As it was, I, like many on campus knew of professor Dunstan, though I had never needed his services.

Maxwell Dunstan was the only statistician in the mathematics department in the college of arts and sciences. He suffered from an inferiority complex, so my fellow students told me, all of whom had consulted him at one time or another. His services were in great demand as an adviser for many dissertations in the social sciences. Although there were quite a few statisticians in the social sciences, the unrealistic demand that every dissertation must have findings that produced statistically significant results was considerable. So it often fell to professor Dunstan to come up with a procedure that produced a probability of .05 or better. As one could imagine, this took some ingenuity on his part. Thus he was well known around the university as a kind of savior. Students went to him when all else failed, and faculty on the students’ dissertation committees were routinely very much relieved and accepted his advice and procedures without question. Unfortunately it was this simple fact that

caused him to suffer his feeling of inferiority, because his colleagues in the mathematics department made fun of him. They considered statistics not to be true mathematics and had opposed his tenure that he Provost overruled them. Which of course worsened his rejection by his colleagues.

Professor Maxwell was, however, a dedicated scholar and academic. He loved the university so much it made his rejection by his colleagues a minor matter. He was proud of the great service he provided to many faculty and students alike. He took collegiality seriously. Indeed, he believed in the university with all his heart and soul.

There was a faint knock at the door and I stood up from my place on the overstuffed chair.

“Enter,” called Colmes.

Professor Dunstan entered, a thin young man probably late thirties, of medium height, black hair, straight and parted to the side in nineteenth century style, dark brown eyes behind thin rimless glasses. He walked up to Colmes’s desk and extended his hand. Colmes took it warmly, well, for him that is.

“Welcome Professor Dunstan. Thank you for coming. I heard your, shall we say, impassioned speech at the senate meeting yesterday.”

“Please, call me Max,” he replied with a thin smile. “I got a bit carried away,” he answered apologetically.

“No need to apologize,” said Colmes, “please take a seat. “And this is my esteemed assistant, Hobson,” Colmes said, nodding in my direction.

“Yes, I think we have met at various times in the past,” I said with a smile.

“Ah yes,” said Dunstan, “a criminal justice dissertation, wasn’t it?”

I blushed with embarrassment and nodded back, wondering what this mind-body problem would turn out to be. And since he showed up at Colmes’s request he probably did not know that he had any kind of mind-body problem. In any case, since I have the advantage of hindsight, this is a good place to tell you of the impassioned speech to which Colmes referred. Embedded in that speech was the mind-body problem as Colmes had insisted on calling it.

The leading issue on the Senate's agenda was one put forward by the Vice President for University Development — the title referring to, essentially, the money raising arm of the university administration. An esteemed alum, whose name remains a secret, had bequeathed forty million dollars to build a new football stadium for the University's football team on the condition that it would maintain Division 1 status.

When Professor Dunstan heard of this, he was incensed and sent a memo to the Chair of the Senate that he was strongly opposed to the university "going commercial" as he said, sacrificing its mission as a university to develop academic curricula, providing a place where minds could meet and the minds of students be developed and challenged. He was invited to address the senate to make his case. The senate was always open to new ideas, wrote the chair of the senate.

The Senate meeting opened, the VP for development made his case for the new stadium, pointing out that although its building would cost much money, it would more than pay for itself with ticket sales. In fact, he claimed, it was the physical education side of the university, the team games, that brought in twice as much money than the rest of the university with its research grants.

Professor Dunstan was prepared for just this argument. Here is a rough outline of his speech, as described to me by various students and faculty who attended. Apparently, Professor Dunstan had stayed at the back at the room, as though he did not belong at the meeting, and as he spoke, began slowly to edge further and further up the aisle between the rows of chairs. Most did not bother to turn around to see who it was making this impassioned speech, until his voice screeched and all wanted him to sit down and shut up.

Here is the gist of his speech:

"This is a public university. We do not need massive donations. We do not want to be driven by enormous amounts of money as are the very sick preoccupations of the Ivy Leagues with their bloated endowments that they rarely spend on their students...

"It is true that the Victorian saying, *in corpore sano—healthy body healthy mind*—is worth acknowledging in universities and all educational institutions. But the pushing of

bodies to maximum as in football, a violent sport, is not healthy, and emphasizes extreme competition...

“The original universities, beginning in the early 11th century, were monasteries. The monks looked on their bodies as sacred, so much so that they had to be hidden away, cloistered and isolated to avoid distraction or infection. The mind fed the body, not the other way around.

“Students are at universities for only a brief period of their lives. Academia is a place for thinking. Not doing. There is a lifetime to do that. “

And so it went. In response the VP for development and various other administrators repeated that the physical education side of the university more than paid for itself, and indeed, since the state government had cut its financial support of the university every year, the university had to find money from other sources if it was to field classes of small size, maintain a good standard of teaching, maintain the excellence it boasted daily. Some departments could not pay for themselves with outside research funds, a good example being the department of classics. Without outside money such programs would have to be closed, especially as there were very few students interested in the classics. And what would be a university that did not have a department of classics?

It was unfortunate that Professor Dunstan got very worked up with his speech. It seems, so my informers told me, that he lost it towards the end, started yelling and accusing the university administration of being only concerned with money and that they didn't give a damn about students, not to mention faculty. In the end, so I am told, Colmes, who had been sitting quietly in the row behind him, gently guided Dunstan out of the room as he ranted and raved at all the faces gawking at him. And apparently none had spoken in favor of his position. Most had remained silent, simply waiting for the vote.

By the way. Colmes had never mentioned, not even when Dunstan came to his office, that he was there at the meeting. I discovered all of this much later.

Colmes began by inviting Professor Dunstan to join us for a cup of tea, to which surprisingly he happily assented. This annoyed me because we had only just had our morning tea.

Colmes gave me a quick look, and I scurried off to the kitchen behind door two, and passed on the request to Rose the younger who was pottering around the kitchen, practicing her knitting, trying to reach the level of expertise of her dear old mother.

“Our mind-body problem has arrived,” I said to Rose jokingly. “Colmes wants cups of tea all round.”

“Nothing like a good cuppa to get the old body working,” said Rose, copying the Russian accent of her mom. She put the kettle on and I turned to join the party in Colmes’s office. Then his voice came loudly down the passage asking for an additional cup of tea for the Provost, and a kitchen chair for her to sit on.

I returned with the chair and plonked it down in front of Colmes’s desk, and nodded with a smile to Dr. Dolittle, muttering “very good to see you again,” and dropped down on the overstuffed chair in the corner. Professor Dunstan watched me with some amusement, then turned to the Provost, expectantly, but she simply addressed Colmes.

“So where are we now with this somewhat regrettable situation?” she asked.

In the presence of the Provost, Professor Dunstan seemed to shrink in size, withdrawing his thin body as much as he could into my wicker chair, his arms crossed hugging himself as though he were in a cooler. Her officious tone that she always used when addressing Colmes did not help things either. In fact, I wondered why Colmes had invited her, but no doubt he had a well thought out reason. Colmes leaned back in his chair.

“As you may well know,” said Colmes with a strong, solid Victorian accent, delivered with a frown at the Provost, “my sentiments are very much on Dr. Dunstan’s side.”

“No doubt,” said Dolittle, laced with sarcasm.

“But I do understand,” Colmes added, “that the university, the body corporate one might say, has a money problem, always has and always will have,” and it is the often unpleasant role of the upper tier of administration to make hard choices in order to keep the university alive and well.”

I leaned back in my overstuffed chair and waited for Dunstan to respond. But he did not. He just sat there, hunched up, looking at the floor.

“So it’s not so much a mind-body problem but a money-body problem,” I thought of saying but did not.

“I do value the one and only thing we appear to have in common,” said Dolittle, looking at Colmes and I must say in a surprisingly friendly way, “and that is the football games, sitting among the students and many parents, cheering on our team. Our purple and yellow colors fluttering in the wind, our school anthem played by the college band...”

It was as though Professor Dunstan were not even sitting there, right between them. And from my perspective I could think of nothing worse than having to sit among a mob of half crazed cheer leaders and barrackers. Whenever I see such crowds at big sports events, I think of the news reels of Hitler’s speeches in the Sportplatz of Berlin. Frightening. But I could see their point. It gave the students a sense of belonging. It was certainly a student body. Very much alive, very much ready to act. It was little wonder that the protests against the Vietnam war came initially from students at universities everywhere. But the underside was — and I hate to say this because it makes me seem old — that for students, action comes first, followed only later by words. Yet paradoxically, the words of ideologues such as Marx and others, worked like kindling in the minds of the young. A healthy body indeed. The body came first, the mind second.

But now, you see, I have wandered off the path. Here, sitting at Colmes’s desk, was a young professor at the height of his powers, an excellent model for his students, a tremendous source for so many frustrated and intellectually timid dissertation students, with nothing to say, having said it all the day before in anger at the Senate meeting. How could my mentor callously allow this situation to arise? Or worse, had he intentionally engineered such an outcome?

Colmes cleared his throat with a small cough. “Doctor Dolittle, perhaps you could explain further to Professor Dunstan how the funds will be used and perhaps how he might also benefit?”

“Yes, of course,” answered the Provost. “I have just come from a meeting with the Dean of Libraries and the VP for development, and am pleased to report that we have arranged to use some of the funds to renovate part of the ground floor library, near the reference section and to construct a special glass enclosed office and study where students can sit with their professor and receive one-on-one instruction and advice.”

Professor Dunstan remained hunched, though there was a slight flicker of apprehension in his eyes. Colmes eyed him carefully and added, “of course, I am sure you have already surmised that the stadium will be built. There is nothing to stop it, and probably it is all for the best anyway, given the way universities are competing with each other these days. We admire — and I know I also speak for the Provost here — your dedication and concern for the future of our university’s pursuit of excellence. But that pursuit requires money, and the stadium is guaranteed to help with that problem.”

Seeing that his remarks only got the faintest response, Colmes added, “believe me, as I demonstrated by my presence at the Senate meeting yesterday, and continue to assure you today, I completely agree with you. In fact I would go much further than you. A university can foster a healthy body through its gymnasium facilities without forcing aggressive competition on the field, which, I have no hesitation in saying, promotes nothing less than legalized violence. And worse, promotes rigid stereotypical us-against-them psychology that justifies violence of one against another. The rules of whatever game are there to whitewash the violence.”

The room fell silent. Professor Dunstan uncurled himself from the wicker chair and sat up more or less straight. And now I was moved to have my say, stimulated as I was by my mentor’s speech.

“Don’t doubt his support,” I said with a serious smile, “Colmes hates going to senate meetings, and only does it when the situation is serious enough to require his presence. Supporting you was one of those situations.” I could have added, as I think I have mentioned in other cases, that Colmes frequented the gym daily and worked out on several of the machines. Though I must say that of late, I have noticed that his visits there have not been as frequent.

Professor Dunstan was at last stirred to speak. “Thanks for your support. I feel better already. I thought I made a fool of myself yesterday. No one spoke up for me,” he said forlornly.

Now it was the Provost’s turn again. “I can say that I speak for the entire university that we value your dedication to your work, especially the additional work you do in assisting dissertation students from every corner of the campus, for it

seems almost every discipline needs someone like you. The special office we have in mind will be for your exclusive use, as often and for as long as you wish it. It is the least that we can do, and..."

Professor Dunstan sat up and at last became somewhat animated. He had come out of his slump. It is important to understand that this offer was one of amazing, shall we say, generosity. To have one's own office inside the university library that was already suffering from lack of space, was no small thing. It would be the envy of the rest of the faculty. Many faculty had asked for such an office. The best they ever got was a desk-shaped cubicle with their name on it.

The professor was overwhelmed. He had his say yesterday. Many—who knows how many—were in secret agreement with him. But the very failure of so many to speak up simply demonstrated to him, as he was now coming to see, that the problem of money and the university was a problem that persisted for generations, and that one small voice such as his could make little difference. What was the word that the sociologists used? Structural, like structural racism. Without money, the university would collapse in upon itself. And if it did, who is to say what may replace it would be better? Or would we be better off without universities? In the meantime, he was and would be very happy doing what he was doing. Meeting with students, helping them solve their research problems. Teaching them how to make of science facts that one could feel comfortable in following. He was about to say thank you and this was all wonderful, when the Provost coughed a little and continued where she had left off.

"And I have already put your name forward to the Senate Committee on Promotions and Tenure, for promotion to Full Professor," she announced as she stood up from her kitchen chair and put out her hand. "Congratulations, and keep up the good work!" She reached out and before he knew it, Professor Dunstan jumped up, grabbed her hand in his and squeezed it with much affection and gratitude. He could hardly wait to get home and tell his wife, who was, as a matter of fact, a graduate student in the department of sociology just finishing off her Ph.D.

And with that, the Provost stood and put out her hand to Colmes who almost smiled as he took it and touched it ever so lightly to his lips—a true Victorian. Dolittle quickly withdrew

and left without further word, followed by Dunstan, running after her as would a well-trained dog.

“Mind over matter,” don’t you think?” quipped Colmes.

“Surely the reverse,” stated Rose the younger with the same forcefulness of her mom.

I sat in my corner on the overstuffed chair and decided to keep out of it. For one thing, I was not sure what, if any, Colmes had contributed to the solution of this problem. It was more like a case of a problem solving itself. All it needed was time.

“So how did you get the Provost to fork over those goodies for Dunstan, and how did you know he would go for them?” persisted Rose.

Colmes sat back in his chair. “A simple matter of human weakness,” said Colmes. “To start with, I knew, well everybody knows, that the Dean of Libraries is a whining, complaining individual who has managed to garner the dislike of many in the administration. So it was a simple matter to suggest something to Dolittle that she would enjoy imposing on her nuisance of a Dean of Libraries. Dolittle is a spiteful bitch as Hobson and I know, don’t we Hobson?”

I nodded in assent. I did not say anything because quite frankly I was uncomfortable when Colmes spoke like this. It was a smugness that every now and then emerged, and unbecoming of a great man, which he almost was.

“And Dunstan, poor little man?” pressed Rose.

“Yes, a bit of a wimp who had his ten minutes of glory in the senate meeting. It was an obvious deduction that he would go for such an attractive offer, especially sitting opposite Dolittle, the Academic Provost, who is held in awe by all faculty, no matter what their status. An academic provost, no matter who it is, has an immense amount of power. She can make or break whole departments and even colleges or schools, let alone individual faculty. Is that not right Hobson, my boy?”

I nodded again in assent. Rose looked at me, amused. I stood and said, “Well I must be off. I have a dissertation to write,” and departed.

