

# Doors to the Past

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## Chapter 1: A Cup of Water and the Arabian Desert

"The mind is a terrible thing to waste. Can anyone tell me who said that?" asked Dr. Laurel Tildequist. She had a magnificent command of the English language for someone who did not speak it natively. Her voice projected above the podium where she stood with a laptop and reached all the way back to the farthest row of bleacher-like seats. Graduate students and undergrads alike had packed the space to capacity. In response to her question, nearly a hundred hands filled the air simultaneously.

"Right," Dr. Tildequist smiled. "We're going to do this in an organized manner. Anyone who is auditing the class, put your hand down." A few hands dropped. "Next, anyone who is on the waitlist, put your hand down." The number of open palms fell by about a third. "OK, one further criteria. Listen closely this time! Keep your hand up if... you are still a virgin."

Surprised laughter broke out. Nearly all of the hands disappeared, some faster than others. A few hands wavered before the question fully sank in. Then they too vanished.

"Now, in a class this size, many of you are liars," Dr. Tildequist began. More laughter followed, though some of it sounded nervous. "This little exercise was designed to generate embarrassment through peer pressure. The question I opened with was factual. Impersonal. I doubt it made any of you feel uncomfortable. However, by applying further criteria like so, prompting you to drop your hand or keep it raised, you revealed something personal about yourself. That felt like a trick, yes? It was manipulative. Not many of us would divulge such information voluntarily, especially in a public space like this, surrounded by strangers."

"I'm totally not a virgin," whispered Lloyd to the girl beside him. He had been among the slowest to respond, and now he was doing damage control.

"My hope is that as we progress," continued Dr. Tildequist, "we will become more open with one another, less fearful of judgement. You should know that I do enjoy putting people on the spot, especially if I feel like they're not listening or contributing."

The girl beside Lloyd whispered back to him, "Don't talk to me."

"Just laying out the facts for you... Dana," Lloyd trailed. He added her name as an afterthought, but she clearly heard him. Dana's eyes narrowed.

"How do you know my name?"

Lloyd gulped. "It's... it's on your name tag," he pointed. Dana was wearing a "Hello, my name is" sticker on her low-cut blouse.

"Oh."

"Just wanted to clarify that I have extensive romantic experience," Lloyd continued.

"Gross."

"Dude, give it a rest," said Grant, who was sitting in the row above Lloyd. "The more you insist, the creepier you sound."

"Mind your own business," Lloyd snarked. He brushed some cookie crumbs off his Pink Floyd t-shirt and fumbled around for his headphones. Grant shook his head, glancing as

causally as possible to see if he had scored any points with Dana. Dana had unfortunately decided to ignore them both.

“Next we’ll try something a little different,” said Dr. Tildequist. “We still need to address my first question. If you already know the answer, please don’t say it aloud. I’d like us to figure it out together through majority vote.” She moved toward the podium where her laptop was open and tapped the spacebar. Behind her, the whole wall dissolved into a slideshow. A red and beige design appeared alongside the doctor’s photo with a paragraph detailing her credentials.

“First, something personal about me. Something you won’t find on the university website staff page. After fifteen years as a neurosurgeon in my home country, I resigned to become a mother. I entered the United States of America on a teaching visa. I’m a naturalized citizen. My parents arranged a marriage for me at the age of twelve. I think jazz is overrated.”

The room responded in an assortment of claps, hollers, hoots, and disappointed groans. Playing off the crowd’s energy, Dr. Tildequist added, “Oh, and like all of you, I am also not a virgin.” This got plenty of laughs. She advanced to the next slide, which was blank. “So, let us determine who said that the mind is a terrible thing to waste. Was it...” she trailed, tapping the laptop spacebar. A checkbox and a name appeared on the wall. “Martin Luther King Jr.?”

“Shakespeare!” someone shouted from the back.

“No, it wasn’t Shakespeare,” the doctor smiled. “That is a popular guess, by the way. Was it... the poet Emily Dickinson?” This garnered a few murmurs. “Not sure? OK. We will keep going.” She tapped the spacebar several times in rapid succession. “Kate Chopin? Sherlock Holmes? Socrates? Aristotle? Hannibal Lecter?”

Grant chewed on the end of a number two pencil. “It’s none of them,” he whispered. His college-ruled notebook was open, but as yet he hadn’t taken any notes. Nothing the doctor had said sounded noteworthy to him. Instead, Grant had begun sketching the back of Lloyd’s head, exaggerating the ears to Dumbo-like proportions.

“Instead of a show of hands, I would like you to shout,” said Dr. Tildequist. She cycled through the candidates again: there was a big shout for Martin Luther King Jr., followed by a tepid response for Emily Dickinson. The student who had originally yelled Shakespeare did so again, although this time he was met with boos for repeating himself. Ultimately, Hannibal Lecter received the loudest feedback.

“Incorrect. Forgive me, that last option was probably in poor taste,” Dr. Tildequist joked.

“None of them,” Grant said aloud this time. “She’s still messing with us.”

“The fact is,” the doctor continued, “none of these people said it.” Portions of the class disparately groaned, clapped, and cheered.

“Told you!” Grant beamed.

“Man, shut up!” Lloyd replied, turning to face him. “Nobody thinks you’re clever.”

“That’s not true. Your mom thinks I’m clever.”

“Wow, a your-mom joke. Why don’t you just wear a sign that says ‘Kick me, I’m a freshman’?”

“Why don’t you just wear a sign that says ‘I want to be a college dropout but I don’t know how’?”

“Dude! What is your problem!” Lloyd shouted.

“Excuse me,” Dr. Tildequist interrupted. “No one should be talking when I’m talking. Is there something you would like to share with the rest of us?” She adjusted a trackball built into the podium, and the ceiling lights responded by illuminating Grant’s section of the room.

“She wasn’t kidding about the spotlight,” Grant muttered. Both he and Lloyd felt their faces flush as the room fell silent, save for a few snickers. Dana leaned as far away from Lloyd as possible. A swarm of audio-bots, each the size of a pinhead, materialized in the spotlight above Grant and Lloyd, descending on them like a cloud of tiny golden stars. At the podium, Dr. Tildequist flipped a switch, and a low hum briefly filled the room before normalizing.

“Uh, hello,” Grant said. His voice resonated from every corner.

“Would you please tell the class your names?” Dr. Tildequist asked.

“Grant.”

“What’s your last name, Grant?”

“Parkhurst.”

“And what is your friend’s name?”

“He’s not my—”

“We’re not friends!” Lloyd yelled, overloading the audio feed. He was obviously unacquainted with the technology. Like lightning in a bottle, the audio-bots swarmed around the room and rendered every stray sound wave inert. Then they whipped back into their cloud formation and resumed hovering above Grant and Lloyd.

“Let’s all remember that we don’t need to shout into the audio-bots,” Dr. Tildequist noted. “Where were we? Oh yes, Mr. Parkhurst and mister...?”

“Tripp. Lloyd Tripp,” answered Lloyd. “Sorry about the noise. I’m in a metal band. We’re actually doing a show at—”

“Thank you, Mr. Tripp,” the doctor interjected. “And who is that squirming next to you?”

“I’m not with them,” Dana rasped.

“Dana,” Lloyd offered.

“And your last name, Dana?”

“Morita,” she mumbled with a humiliated expression.

“Thank you.” Dr. Tildequist deactivated the audio-bots and repositioned the ceiling lights back toward the stage. “As I said earlier, I hope that we’ll get to know each other as a group over the semester. Toward that end, Grant, Lloyd, and Dana will be assigned a special project to share with us this Friday. I would like the three of you to prepare a 15-minute presentation on a famous thought experiment. Is anyone familiar with the trolley problem?”

Several tepid hands appeared in the crowd. Dr. Tildequist focused the spotlight and audio-bots on a barrel-chested student in a striped shirt. “Yes, you with the impressive facial hair.”

“I’m Chad,” he answered in a sandpapery voice. “In the early 20th century, the trolley problem was a theoretical moral dilemma designed to force a choice between sacrificing one life or multiple lives for the greater good. An example of this dilemma was popularized in the cinematic motion picture event *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, starring Leonard Nimoy—”

“Thank you, that’s enough,” Dr. Tildequist nodded. “In my home country, we have another name for this dilemma. It is referred to as a cup of water and the Arabian desert. Grant, Lloyd, and Dana, this will be the subject for your presentation. Please highlight the major differences between the western and eastern concepts. Then the whole class will propose a solution together. Let’s end early today. Before we do, can I have Wallace, Terri, and Miriam come onstage?”

In the front row, an attractive senior in slacks and a sweater vest took the stage, followed by two girls. “Hi, I’m Wallace,” the man said.

“I’m Terri.”

“And I’m Miriam,” the last girl said. She had frizzy brown hair and wore an off-the-shoulder yellow blouse with a black skirt. Grant liked her immediately.

“Oh man,” Lloyd moaned. “I can’t deal with this. I have a show on Friday. I was gonna bail class! This is all your fault,” he growled at Grant.

“Shut up! Do you want to get us into more trouble?” Grant snapped. “Let’s figure out a time we can meet up before Friday. I’ll do everything myself and just email you your parts. It will be easier that way.”

“Works for me,” Dana whispered. “But I’m not giving him my number,” she said, pointing an index finger in Lloyd’s face. Her gaudy fingernail extension was colored hot pink.

“My band can’t perform without me,” Lloyd lamented. “You losers are on your own.”

“I said I would do the whole thing! All you have to do is show up and stand next to us on the stage. You won’t even have to talk.”

“You promise?”

“I can’t promise doctor what’s-her-face—”

“Tildequist,” said Dana.

“Right, Tildequist—I can’t promise Tildequist won’t make you say something, but you’ll get full credit on the paper.”

“There’s a paper, too?” Lloyd complained. “Ah, man. We’re so screwed.”

Grant wanted to punch him in the face. “Maybe later,” he whispered. “After Friday.”

Onstage, Miriam continued. “...and we’ll be helping with paperwork, so be sure to include the class number and your full name on every assignment, top-left corner, in blue or black ink if handing it in physically.”

“Thank you, Miri.” As the three helpers walked off, Dr. Tildequist placed her hands on either side of the podium. “I say this to every new class. You are at university now. This is not high school. This is not community college. As your professor, I will not hold your hand or coddle you. I don’t have the time. That’s why Wallace, Terri, and Miriam will be grading your work based on a rubric outlined in the syllabus. Participate in discussion, engage in the ideas, read the assigned pages. You’ll get out of this class only what you put into it. If you decide to drop the class, you have until Friday. The class number is Psychology 101 with Tildequist. Now get out of here.”

## Chapter 3: Journalism in the 21st Century

Clarendon University was equal parts prestigious and expensive. Grant knew this all too well, as did his father William. Even William's father Robert, or "Grandpa Gabe" as Grant knew him, had tasted a bit of the university's rarified air. All three Parkhurst men had passed through the university's doors at one time or another. In Grant's case, it had only been three months earlier during the final campus tour of the summer. He had received four acceptance letters before making a decision. Three of those had been from universities located out of state. His family lived in Astoria, Oregon. Clarendon lay south of Astoria along the coast by 160 miles, putting an estimated three and a half hours of separation between Grant and his parents. Not an insurmountable distance, but sufficient to keep their worlds from overlapping. The odds of that happening were already pretty slim; between William's frequent jetting across the country in pursuit of real estate and Caroline's ever-changing trade show schedule, Grant rarely saw the two of them together under the same roof. Perhaps that was why their marriage had lasted.

For now, at least, Grant was free of his parents. The next fifteen weeks of this semester belonged to him—plenty of opportunity to appreciate the breathtaking vistas of the Oregon coastline. A good portion of that was owned by the university. In an unprecedented purchase, Clarendon had swept up all of the non-government land between the Cape Perpetua Marine Reserve to the west and the Siuslaw National Forest to the east. The bits in between were on loan from the government, making development not only fraught with red tape but also prohibitively expensive. Naturally, this was reflected in tuition rates. Rarified air indeed.

At the moment, however, Grant was not impressed. He and twelve other students were sitting in a cramped Super Shuttle in a parking lot some twenty minutes from campus. Body odor, testosterone, and flatulence abounded. Their driver, Amir, spoke English with a heavy accent and seemed anxious to drop them off. Overall, the situation did not look promising.

"The building's locked," Miriam shouted, jogging toward the shuttle. A gust of wind blew her wiry brown hair into her face so that she could barely see. She groped at the passenger side door handle and got in, much to Amir's surprise. Grant had seen Miriam onstage during Dr. Tildequist's psychology class a day earlier. What was she doing here?

"No passengers in the front seat," Amir objected.

"It's freezing outside. Can't I just sit here for a second?"

Grant was in the row immediately behind the passenger seat, so he unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned forward to interrupt.

"Hi, excuse me. You're Miriam, right? I'm Grant."

"She is not a passenger," Amir insisted.

Grant ignored him. "Are you taking 21st Century Journalism too?"

"Yeah, but the building's locked. Professor Erbocrat should already be here. My friend Desiree gave me a ride. I've been freezing my ass off for like ten minutes."

"Amir," Grant asked, "if the professor doesn't show up, aren't you supposed to take us back to campus?"

"I have to pee," someone said from the back of the shuttle. "And I'm hungry."

"You must get out of the front seat," Amir said to Miriam. "It is company policy."

"Wow," Miriam marveled, opening the door. "It's like I'm talking to a wall." She got out, slammed the door angrily, and then opened the sliding door and got back in. All of the spaces were occupied.

"Here, have my seat," Grant offered, seizing the opportunity to be a gentleman.

"Are you sure?" Miriam asked.

"My ass is plenty warm," he joked. It wasn't his best work, but Miriam laughed.

"Thanks."

Grant crouched and waddled between the legs of two other students, then did an awkward face-off with Miriam as they exchanged places by rotating clock-wise. He made a conscious effort not to stare at her butt and failed miserably. Then it was Miriam's turn to do the leg-weaving waddle before she was able to sit down. Grant lingered with one foot on the floorboard and the other in the parking lot, half in and half out. The air inside the shuttle was so ripe that he had begun to feel nauseous. Thankfully, the wind was blowing fierce enough to vent the shuttle. The abrupt change in temperature was also refreshing. The last thing Grant wanted to do was projectile vomit all over Miriam.

"So now what?" she asked. Her question prompted the other students to speak up.

"Why did we even come here? This was a waste of time."

"How long should we wait?"

"What kind of name is Erbocratz? Jewish?"

"I say we blow this popsicle stand and get some burgers!"

"I'm a vegan. I don't eat beef."

"Let me call my supervisor," Amir conceded. Beads of perspiration glistened on the poor man's brow. He looked stressed and haggard. Grant had assumed their driver was irritated. Perhaps he was sick, too? He felt a twinge of sympathy, but only briefly. His thoughts turned to whether or not they would all catch whatever bug Amir was carrying.

"Be quiet in the back," Amir shouted, pressing his thumb into an oval recess on the steering wheel column. An orange video icon lit up in the center of the dashboard. Then the shuttle windshield became opaque, obscuring the parking lot and trees beyond. Light projected from the video icon and filled the windshield with a Super Shuttle logo.

"Hello, Amir. Your vehicle is registered as #522. Is this correct?" The voice belonged to whomever Amir had contacted, but as of yet, there was no actual video feed.

"Yes, that is correct. I am not seeing you."

"Your signal is too weak for video. Please move the shuttle approximately 3.3 meters north of its current position. Or I can reposition the shuttle for you remotely. Did you know that you have a door ajar?"

"Close the door," Amir said to Grant, twisting around in his seat. "She is going to move the shuttle. Seatbelts on everyone." Several clicks followed as the students, Miriam included, did as Amir instructed. Only Grant didn't have a belt to buckle. He had just closed the sliding door

when Amir pointed at him and said, “You, you have to get out. The Super Shuttle will not move if you are not safely secured.”

“How super,” Grant grunted, heaving the door open again. A strong gust of wind whipped at his jacket and nearly carried off his glasses. Thankfully his hair was short—no muss, no fuss, as Grandpa Gabe used to say. Or rather still said, as Grandpa Gabe wasn’t dead yet. How long had it been since his grandfather transitioned to the retirement home?

“I’m sorry!” Miriam hollered, feeling guilty. Grant couldn’t actually hear her words, but he saw her lips moving. Figuring she wouldn’t be able to hear him either, he got ready to slide the shuttle door shut for the umpteenth time and hollered back, “You’re beautiful!” Apparently she heard him just fine. In half a second, she looked surprised, then flattered, and ultimately embarrassed.

“Crap on a stick,” Grant muttered, just as the door closed. He took several steps back and nearly fell over from another gust. “Cut it out already!” A moment of realization hit him. There he was, Grant Parkhurst, literally shouting at the wind. He tried not to see it as a metaphor for how he dealt with life’s problems.

Save for himself and the Super Shuttle, the parking lot was empty. He watched in amusement as the shuttle lurched forward, stopped, and then began crawling into the next parking spot. Ridiculous. Its movement reminded him of a remote-control toy car whose batteries were nearly drained. That was another memory involving Grandpa Gabe, albeit one from Christmas a long time ago. Gabe’s rest home, or retirement community—or whatever politically correct title they had given it to ease their conscience—was located only a few miles further south. He hadn’t told anyone, but his decision to attend Clarendon was based in part on its proximity to his grandfather.

Grant wrapped his arms around himself, bracing against the ill weather. At least it wasn’t raining. The wind was beginning to soften now. Since the shuttle wasn’t going anywhere fast, Grant walked toward the locked building where Professor Erbocratz was supposed to be teaching their journalism class. The university’s newspaper had a dedicated bullpen, nicknamed “Dante’s Inferno,” which was currently undergoing renovation. Allegedly, an overly-curious bear cub had climbed a tree limb that extended over the bullpen’s roof, fallen, and crashed through the skylight. Such were the perils of building a university in the sticks.

In contrast, this particular building, named the Touchstone Building, directly overlooked the coast. It had been a tourist point for visitors before the Cape Perpetua Marine Reserve closed its doors. The wide structure straddled the cliffside and featured floor-to-ceiling glass panels facing the ocean. The view, Grant had been told, was spectacular. Anyone afraid of heights might have begged to differ. Unsurprisingly, the Touchstone Building was on loan to the university. Presently, it served as an adjunct location for off-campus courses.

Grant ascended a wheelchair ramp leading to an alcove. Miriam had said the doors were locked, but now he wondered. He glanced back at the Super Shuttle. It had finally parked. Amir was likely still wasting everyone’s time by asking his superiors for instructions over video chat when the audio link would have sufficed. Even a child could have discerned the proper course of action. Grant caught himself. “Travel a mile in his shoes,” he said aloud. Another nugget of

wisdom from Grandpa Gabe. Amir was simply trying to make a living for himself in a foreign country, speaking a foreign language, driving a foreign automobile—even if said automobile could technically be driven remotely.

Grant tried the first of two L-shaped door handles. It was indeed locked. How about the second handle? It felt secure, but not necessarily locked. He pressed his weight against the door, squeezed the handle again, and raised the door ever so slightly off the ground—click! Sure enough, the door opened. The mechanism had simply been stuck. Grant entered a modest foyer decorated with all kinds of marine habitat paraphernalia: sea charts, migration patterns, framed photos from local photographers, driftwood sculptures—it was a charming if dusty microcosm of Oregon culture. Beyond the foyer was a wide open space with several collapsible tables and folding chairs. A whiteboard, clock, and desk resided at the far end. Power cords ran the length of the room on either side, secured to the uncarpeted floor with gaffer tape. The floorboards were beautiful pieces of reclaimed wood with various grains and stains. Rustic, charming, and... oh, but the view!

Grant's mouth fell open at the sight of a tepid gray sea stretching across the horizon. His peripheral vision couldn't find the ends of it. His breathing stopped for a moment before he remembered to exhale. It was no exaggeration to say that he was floating in the sky. Bits of brown sea foam, carried high in the air by the wind, splashed noiselessly on the rocks below. If serenity had a shape, it looked like this.

The epiphany ended with the arrival of the other students. They filed into the foyer talking excitedly, some complaining about the cold, others stomping off in search of the bathrooms and vending machines. Grant hoped there weren't any vending machines to be found. He watched anxiously as the last of the students wandered in. Through one of the ordinary eastern windows, he saw the Super Shuttle zip out of the parking lot and head back onto the 101 highway. Then the door to the Touchstone Building closed, and Miriam stood in the foyer.

Grant was biased, but he nonetheless found her delightful: light bronze skin, freckles, round cheeks, and big white teeth that were delightfully imperfect. Grant didn't know why, but Miriam's impossibly crazy hair made him want to laugh. He noticed she was wearing blue medical scrubs beneath a yellow parka and rain boots.

"Apparently, I'm beautiful?" she asked.

"About that. Normally I'd take my time to build a rapport with you, make terrible puns, and then work up the courage to get your number. But in my defense, I didn't think you'd actually hear me, so, yes. I'll say it for real. You're beautiful... and now I feel like I'm in high school all over again."

"Miriam," she said with a smile, walking toward him and extending her hand. "But my friends call me Miri. I'd like to think our first introduction didn't actually happen in a Super Shuttle, so this is me rewriting the past ten minutes. I'm a time-traveler. It's how I roll."

"Hi, I'm Grant," he answered, accepting her hand, "and I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about because the past ten minutes of my life have just been erased."

They both laughed. This was going surprisingly well.

“OK, Grant. In the interest of full disclosure, you should know that I’m an overachieving, A-type personality who’s only taking journalism because, apparently, twenty-two credits just isn’t enough to stress me out. Plus, I work part-time as a teacher’s aide grading papers and generally doing tasks that are supposed to be done by the people who receive our tuition money... so there’s that.” She took a deep breath. “I think that about sums me up.”

“Succinct and to the point. I like that,” Grant nodded. “My turn. I tend to overcompensate for my insecurities by speaking my mind and then doubling down on my decisions, be they good or bad. I probably blame my parents for too many of my own shortcomings. I actually do love journalism, and all media for that matter. Communications sounded both easy and terrifying at the same time, especially that bit about traveling the world and interviewing people.”

“Cool,” she said, nodding. She pointed to a folding chair. “Are you sitting here?”

“I am now.”

“Good answer.” They both sat down and slung their backpacks onto the table.

“Have you met Professor Erbocrazt before?” Grant asked. “I’m guessing you’re a sophomore if you’re a teacher’s aide.”

“No, but I’ve heard the other professors drop his name occasionally. I’m not technically a sophomore. I started during the summer, took Tildequist’s psych class, loved it, then saw that they were hiring for the fall. My major is stupidly expensive. Occupational therapy.”

“Right, the scrubs. Are you already practicing or volunteering? Or how does that work?”

“Ugh, it’s crazy. I complain that I don’t have any time for anything, but truthfully, I’d go insane if I ever had to slow down. Part of my education is hands-on training with patients. If I’m not in class, that’s usually what I’m doing.”

“No time for sleep then?”

“What’s that, some kind of Vietnamese food?” she laughed. “I love noodles, by the way. Oh! Side note. I’m also minoring in nutrition.”

“Wow. Suddenly I feel like a lump on a log. Just thirteen credits this semester.”

“So you’ll graduate when you’re like, what, seventy-five?” Miriam joked.

“And you’ll be fully-certified to help with my rehabilitation! Perfect. I’ve never used a bedpan before. Are they comfortable?”

“Oh, you’d have to ask a nurse about that. We OTs help with mobility, a healthy lifestyle, recovering from injuries, etc. Sadly I won’t be the lucky one who gets to wipe your poopy bottom after you’ve crapped all over yourself.”

“Hey, I was born crapping myself, I figure I’ll die crapping myself. That’s symmetry for you.”

“Way to go all dark, Batman. But seriously. What are you going to do with all that free time? Are you into football? You’ve got the build for it. Not that I’ve been looking. But if I had been looking, that’s what I’d have seen.”

Now it was Grant’s turn to feel embarrassed. He hadn’t given his major much thought before now. “I don’t know,” he answered. From her expression, Miriam seemed to be expecting him to say something different. Had he disappointed her already?

“Hey, is that a plane?” asked a student named Jackie, who had pressed her face against the glass. She wore a fuzzy fur coat, a pair of overalls, and no socks. “I think it’s a plane. Yup, definitely a plane.”

On the horizon, gliding steadily above the water, a World War II-era biplane made a beeline for the Touchstone Building. This was hardly the sort of weather to be flying in, let alone flying in an ancient aircraft.

“What the...?” Grant trailed. Several students had wandered into the main room while he and Miriam had been talking, and now the bulk of them were gathering around the window, watching and waiting. Nobody had any clue as to what was happening.

“Do you think it’s Erbocratz?” Grant asked Miriam. She stood up and strained to see out the window. “I need glasses so badly,” she muttered. “Why would he be traveling in a biplane? Where would he even land?”

Their questions were soon answered as the biplane flew past them, circled back in a broad loop, and slowed to a crawl before hovering above the roof of the building, hundreds of feet above the students. They could no longer see it, but they could hear the deafening roar of the propeller. A glimmering dome covered the biplane’s pilot seat—obviously an additional to the original design. Indeed, very few of the craft’s historic pieces were functional. The biplane then began a 90-degree vertical descent, confirming that its original machinery had been gutted and stuffed with modern technology.

Inside the building, the students heard the biplane’s wheels light on the roof with a gentle strain. Grant ran outside in disbelief. This was easily the strangest thing he had ever seen.

“Professor Erbocratz?” he shouted. A portly man bedecked in old-world clothes walked across the roof to a service ladder and began climbing down. His hands were gloved and he wore a pair of aviator goggles. Short curly hair, thinning in many places, spilled out from beneath a yamaka. So, Erbocratz was Jewish after all. That or it was part of his costume.

“Hello,” the professor said, touching Grant’s shoulder and gesturing. “Shall we go inside? Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the weather’s pretty terrible out here.” Both men entered the building and regrouped with the rest of the students.

“Hello, hello!” Erbocratz welcomed them. “So sorry I’m late. Oh, and look at me... dressed to the nines in period costume. You see, a colleague of mine... oh, but that’s irrelevant. Suffice it to say,” he continued, heading toward the desk at the end of the room, “I profusely apologize for being so tardy. Most unprofessional. Hah! This has likely been a bizarre day for all of you. Being dragged off-campus, waiting alone in a musty building, only to meet me dressed like this arriving in a biplane.” He gave a big, hearty, genuine laugh.

Grant looked at Miriam, who shrugged. He asked the professor, “So, is this still 21st Century Journalism?”

“Yes, this is class group C. Groups A and B usually fill up to capacity, and then any leftovers are added to Group C. We’re the overflow group. But what a view, eh? Anyhow, seeing as we only having one school newspaper, we’ll be assigning roles and rotating responsibilities with the other groups. Groups A and B meet on separate days. First, as I said, welcome. I’m

Professor Eugene Erbocratz. Do forgive my clothes. Let's begin by going over the class roster. I've got it somewhere."

Grant took his seat beside Miriam and the other students made their way back to the tables. Backpacks rustled, notebooks came out, and something resembling a normal journalism class got under way. The professor put on a pair of round glasses and called out the names of all the students, alphabetically, one by one, and asked them to share three things about themselves. Miriam's last name was Hill, so she was among the first to go.

"I'm Miriam, my dad's black, my mom's white... I'm an Oreo. Currently single but looking," she smiled, nudging Grant's foot beneath the table.

"Miss Hill," the professor intoned, "this isn't Craigslist. Something more substantial, please."

"Purple is my favorite color. I don't like Jell-O because it's too squishy?"

"That'll do. Next. Jacobson?"

And so it continued, until Grant's turn finally came.

"Grant Parkhurst," Grant said, standing. "I'm an avid reader—I'll read almost anything once, and I enjoy researching new topics. Journalism interests me because it represents the pursuit of truth. Truth matters to me. The truth can hurt, the truth can be ugly, but at the end of the day, the truth can set you free. I wouldn't want to live in a world without truth."

"Interesting," said Professor Erbocratz. "You're paraphrasing Christ when he said, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' Frequently, people leave out the full context of the quote and never give attribution. We'll have an entire class dedicated to AP formatting for direct and indirect quotes. Next."

"Color me impressed, Parkhurst," Miriam whispered when Grant had sat down.

"I didn't realize that was from the Bible," he whispered back.

When all of the introductions had concluded, Professor Erbocratz went to the whiteboard and popped the cap off an Expo marker.

"Old-school," he said. "We're keeping it old-school. You'd better get this through your heads right now." He scrawled out several words, circled them, and faced the students. "Who! What! When! Where! Why! Journalism 101. We don't ask yes or no questions. Who can tell me why?"

Hands went up. The professor called on Jackie Jacobson, the girl in the fuzzy jacket and overalls who had first spied his biplane. She answered, "Yes or no questions don't tell you anything. They're a conversational dead-end."

"Right! We don't want dead-ends. Or split ends, for the matter," he joked, shaking his head so that his curls bounced. "Open-ended questions help us dig deeper. They facilitate discussion, especially from people who may be reluctant to give detailed answers. OK, let's get your mental gears grinding." He pulled up his slacks a bit and then sat on the front of the desk. "Every one of you will have a chance to interview somebody. That can be intimidating, especially if you're not the outgoing type. This is a three-credit class that only meets twice a week, but I promise that you're going to find yourself stretched. Reporting requires a significant time sink even for those of us who do it for a living."

Miriam rubbed her temples. Grant had been wondering about her credit load. Whereas he had plenty of time in his schedule for zipping around campus to conduct interviews, Miriam already had so much going on. Could she juggle this class, too? Just then, he saw her jot something down. She had been taking notes on everything—from what their fellow students had shared about themselves to the professor's seemingly inane tangents about whiteout in the age of typewriters. Wow! Was Miriam Hill the most capable, competent woman on earth? Or were Grant's standards for himself simply below average?

"Think of someone you already know," the professor continued. "Your first assignment will be to interview a family member or close friend. This may be a lot more difficult than you think. Parents, siblings—they know us. They know our faults. If you poke at them with a reporter's stick, you may be surprised at how they respond."

Grant's thoughts turned to Grandpa Gabe. What was Gabe's first name?

"Hey, look at the time," the professor laughed, pointing to the wall clock. "According to that, it's 6 p.m. Only a few hours off. Did I mention this building is an adjunct? Peace, quiet, and little to no maintenance whatsoever. It's old-school, people. Today's Tuesday, so I'll see you all on Thursday. Thanks for your patience."

As the class broke, Grant shook his head in disbelief. "No way."

"What?" Miriam asked.

"I just realized I don't even know my grandpa's first name."

"How's that possible? What do you call him?"

"Gabe. My dad just calls him 'dad,' and my mom calls him 'Bob'."

"Gabe's probably short for Gabriel. Bob's likely short for Robert. Mystery solved. We should rent a van for Halloween that looks like the Mystery Machine! I'm definitely Velma. That girl has curves like Lombard Street."

"Zoinks!" Grant laughed. "Oh, speaking of a van." He glanced through the window at the parking lot. "There's the Super Shuttle. Fun times ahead."

"Shoot me now. Hey, you should interview your grandpa," Miriam encouraged.

Grant nodded.

"He's been on my mind lately. I think I will."