

The Exam

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

On a busy late afternoon in Pellegrin City, the Main Station transit hub's Gray Line is bustling with subway commuters. Standing opposite one another on different platforms, two students from the same alma mater await their separate trains heading in alternate directions. On route to Citadel Terminus, Leon waits alongside his large duffle bag of luggage, packed the night before for his long trip back home from overseas. Heading to Modswell Station, Caroline prepares to board her train with a heavy dark blue backpack on her shoulders. After about five minutes of waiting on the platform, Caroline's train speeds out of the tunnel and slows to a gradual halt. Leon, still standing opposite the commuters on the other side, catches a quick glimpse of the strangely familiar Lincoln College student on the platform facing him before she is obstructed from view by the arriving train. After the chime sounds a second time, the train lurches out of Main Station and Caroline disappears completely from view along with her fellow westbound commuters, as the platform clears again following the cyclical ebb and flow rhythms of afternoon underground locomotion.

Mid-way through his third year, Leon was trying his best to keep up his grades amid the busyness of varsity sports. A midfielder on Lincoln College's soccer squad, he had to balance performing on the playing field with maintaining a high GPA to continue to fulfill the requirements of his academic scholarship. Before heading home after fall term final exams, Leon gets back his mark in a Geography and GIS course and is surprised at how low the mark is. He calls his friend Peter, a former first year roommate who happened to also be in the same Geography course.

"Hey Pete! It's Leo speaking. Just calling about the exam last Thursday..."

"Hey Leo! What's up! You mean the Geo-GIS one?"

"Yeah... Just got my mark back... Couldn't believe how low it was. How did you do?"

"Heard the marks were normalized or something. Didn't really affect my mark much though. I got an 84%. Saw you leave the exam room early. What happened?"

"You mean they used the Watt Curve? I don't get it... I thought I answered most questions correctly. I was expecting a mid to low eighty and ended up with a 63%..."

"A sixty-three? You should complain or something. I wonder what your mark was before they curved it. Don't make much sense to me either."

As a requirement in her architecture program, Caroline had to take the Geography and GIS course as one of her first year core courses. After searching her mark electronically before heading home for a Christmas study break, she is stunned that her mark is over twenty points lower than she would have expected. She decides to visit the Department of Geography Chair in his office, after repeatedly trying to reach his secretary to book an appointment. On her way to the Columbus Building, Caroline

takes a stroll through a less familiar part of the Lincoln College campus, passing a large sculpture of a female figure clutching a diploma in her hand and flanked by an empty pool and fountain. She then goes down a flight of concrete steps and along an underground corridor to reach the Geography Department's labs and faculty offices. After searching around for the right room number, she finds the Department Chair's office around a corner and at the end of the hallway. After timidly knocking on the door, a gruff male voice hollers out: "Come on in!" After entering the large office, Caroline notices a vacant reception area, adjacent another room with a bright light on and its door ajar. Upon entering the second room, she sees a stocky middle-aged man seated at his desk with round spectacles and brown suspenders. On the wall behind the department chair are a set of black and white pictures of old field study trips along with a set of dark brown wooden masks that appeared to be from parts of Papua New Guinea.

"Hello Sir. I'm Caroline Summersby. I made an appointment with your secretary regarding the recent end of term Geography and GIS final exam."

"Of course. That's Dr. Pendrick's course I believe, is it not?" The Chair of Geography answers without diverting his eyes from his desktop computer.

"Yes... I'd like to know my actual mark before the Watt Curved result. I suspect that my mark would have been significantly higher than the 69% I received."

"Well... You see Miss.... We felt we needed to adjust the marks to have a normalized distribution for the class, which is what we like to see when the curve of the marks deviates too much from the standard normal curve..." The professor answers looking squarely at Caroline with a stern look of paternalistic condescension.

"I just don't get how some marks could have been raised while others are lowered. It makes more sense to raise or lower marks equally, or quite simply to leave the marks as they are..."

"Unfortunately, the faculty's rules on normalizing marks are non-negotiable. Thus, your mark will remain as it stands. I can give you information on the Watt Curve to peruse at your leisure. Statistically curving results like we did in this recent Geo exam are now academic policy in the majority of accredited colleges throughout the OUS."

About an hour after speaking to Caroline and seeing her out, the Department Chair grabs his cap and lamb's wool jacket before locking the main door to his office. He then heads to the south exit of the Columbus Building through the underground corridor and walks up the flight of steps toward the same sculptured fountain. After looking both ways to be sure no one can spot him, his hand grasps a small hidden lever on the side of an out-of-view concrete slab by one of the fountain's concealed corners, opening up a dissimulated entrance leading to a flight of rocky steps. After heading in, he shuts the hidden door and makes the lever lock back into place behind him. After heading down the darkened steps, he reaches into his pocket to get his phone out and

uses its light to walk along a cavernous tunnel. After about three minutes of covert commuting, he reaches a special chamber and looks at his watch noticing that he is early for a top-secret meeting with a fellow university ally. After a few more minutes of waiting in the darkened meeting hall, he hears the clicking of well-timed steps coming from another secretive visitor taking a different tunnel just opposite his location.

“Ahoy! Is that you Wilfred?” The Department Chair shouts aloud.

“Eddie! It’s been quite a while!”

“Something just came up... I just had a visit with that architecture student who’s been pestering my secretary about the exam. I got a bit worried when she asked me for her actual mark before ‘The Curve’.”

“Yeah... They better not check my print on the campus these days. I’ll soon be a wanted man with U-Security if they ever look me up for exam fraud through the years.”

“They’ll never figure out you’re involved. You’re a varsity soccer coach. There’s really no connection to mark swapping if it’s a geo course. I’ll get blamed much sooner than you as a suspicious Chairperson.”

“They better not look into my print in the Carlyle case. I have to admit I slipped up with that soccer ball that was left behind in her dorm after she disappeared. They’ll find me on it as coach of the boys’ squad if they look up prints.”

“Relax... You know where I could get caught? They could look up who turns up on security footage in the university archives two weeks ago. I took the blueprints to the Lincoln College Athletic Centre... You see, we’re working on tunneling out a spy chamber and have our place scoped out just right. When I checked the plans for the women’s change room, there is just enough room behind one of the shower room walls.”

“Do you have the exams in question? I want to know the evidence stays hidden. If they look up Leon’s paper and see exam fraud, I couldn’t eventually get expelled and facing charges in court.”

“No worries... I’ve got the four exams that are most worrisome. Caroline Summersby, Leon Castillo and the two low-level outlier recruits that we swapped their marks with.”

“I want to know they’re all hidden well. Where are they?”

“I’ve got them right here for now in this folder just behind me. The plan is to move the exam hard copies to the LCAC once the tunnel is made to the new spy chamber.”

A minute or two later, Leon’s train thunders out of the subway tunnel, with a loud mechanical roar at its approach, dimming slightly as the connected cars grind to a halt alongside the eastbound platform. As the doors open to the sound of a familiar chime, he boards one of the middle cars and finds a place to sit with his luggage by his feet. Soon, the doors close and the train speeds back into the darkness, with Leon closing

his eyes and putting on his headphones to drown out any negative thoughts about his final exams.

[The End]