Calypso's Pain

by

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The pale green button popped off the few remaining frayed threads when he pulled his jacket open. Like a plastic tiddlywink, the button somersaulted in a slow arc right into the turquoise waters of the urinal.

"DAMN!"

Ralph Stephens was in a hurry, and now he was pissed—and aware of the pun at the same time for, you see, Ralph Stephens was a teacher of English, and he had just walked rather quickly from the high school parking lot to heed nature's call. In a few moments he would be standing before a set of students making their first appearance of the new school year. The damn button was mocking him, that was clear, and he was in no mood to deal with personification at a time like this, standing there with his zipper down. Ralph Stephens was in a hurry, and he had a serious decision to make.

Mr. Stephens wore suits or sport coats to work mostly because he thought he looked good in them, and he didn't mind embracing a bit of vanity about his slender build in a time of rampant obesity. With the button safely swaddled in a wad of toilet paper in his pocket, he tried not to think about his lapels flapping in the hot autumn breeze. Most of his dress clothes were left over from his professional days in the coat-and-tie work world. Like he said to fellow teacher Tom Saurez, "You know why I dress like this, Tom? Because I can!" Decked out in running shoes, pressed blue jeans, and a Hawaiian shirt, Saurez responded with a studied indifference, "And you know why I dress like this, Ralph? Because I can." Stephens liked to joke that the jackets helped students avoid confusing him for just another student on campus. Besides, it was the first day of school, and he was serious enough to want to make a professional impression.

He maneuvered the safety lock with one hand, propped open the steel fire door with the other, and then perched himself on a student desk near the door where he could greet and smile at the teenagers who drifted in. He fondly called the room his "hovel," not as an homage to Victor Frankenstein's creature's first real home, but because it was something of a rundown shack. A supposedly temporary portable classroom, it had been dragged, after years of service, from an elementary school across town and then dropped in place in a row when the high school opened over ten years ago. Other than eventually replacing fluorescent tubes when they went dark, and repairing the air conditioning unit clamped to its rear wall, not a penny had been spent since then to make it any more attractive or comfortable. Stephens doubted the so-called "deep cleaning" scheduled for each summer, and he secretly planned to take a chunk of the room's carpeting with him when he left; he would donate it to a research university for future archaeological examination. The grimy, mutilated aluminum blinds covering the window at each end of the room, manhandled by dozens of indifferent custodians over years of pointlessly checking to be sure the windows were locked, had long ago sunk into the room's tableau of neglect that Stephens no longer noticed.

The electronic tone—B flat—sounded the beginning of the new school year's first class period. Stephens looked at the faces before him and nervously swallowed the awe that struck him each August when all he could feel was the gap in age and the yawning gulf of life experience between himself and this room full of strangers. Before him were thirty-five portraits of aggressiveness, passivity, hope, boredom, enthusiasm, numbness. His own portrait, reflected in their eyes, was an oval of graying hair, still full on the top, a curve of trim beard on the bottom. What did they see? He thought of the moist wad of toilet paper in his pocket. Damn!

Summer vacation was over, but Sacramento's searing sun still roasted and desiccated all unirrigated life. Scorched yellow grass bordered in a rigid line the lush turf hit daily by sprinklers. Waves of heat, like fun house glass, shimmered off the boiling blacktop of the parking area. The morning world squinted under the glare of a vengeful sun. Inside, the students accepted the classroom as a cool refuge. Shy conversations sprouted between the paired fourteen-year-olds assigned to present a brief oral introduction, not of themselves, but of the student next to them.

Most schools in California still begin around Labor Day at the start of September, and finish their year around Memorial Day at the end of May. Scholars and desperate reformers mock that cycle as an anachronism, no longer justifiable since children neither help plant the fields in the spring nor harvest them in the fall. In Stephens' view, that analysis of public education's history misses the point. The summer break, he understood, was not a remnant of an agrarian past, and certainly not the result of any confirming scientific

studies or test scores. Stephens saw it as part of an organic process: the school year's nine month calendar matches the cycle of human gestation. Just as the Creator lovingly takes nine months to forge an entirely new, original personality delivered to the world as a baby, the school year takes nine months to create an almost entirely new person, and then takes three months to reset the machinery before starting the cycle all over again.

With luck, this cycle is cumulative, building a stronger human being year after year. With less luck, movement is sometimes more lateral than vertical, and the product is more resilient than strong. By the ninth grade, children have endured at least a dozen adults who have engaged or offended them, frightened or charmed them, introduced them to the world of ideas, or scarred forever their tender willingness to learn.

They look so much alike, he thought, and yet so distinct from each other. The hair came in two colors, brown and black. It was long and wavy, straight or streaked, curly or buzz cut, depending on gender and on where, as Stephens put it, their grandparents grew up. The girls whose breasts had arrived wore tight jersey tops with lowered necklines; those still waiting wore looser-fitting tops, virtually the same as the boys. The key distinction between genders: the girls wore their denim wrapped tightly around their bottoms and all the way down past their knees; the boys of every background draped their denim like great heavy curtains from a line below the waistbands of motley boxer shorts.

It was time to present. Mr. Stephens listened with the customary exaggerated enthusiasm. Following the simple outline on the scarred and smudgy white board, each student reported the required information, standing with the partner in front of the class. They spoke mostly in quiet voices, too nervous to look at the person they were talking about. Some finished with obvious pride in their presentation, some with a defiant smirk, and some virtually ran from the stage when they were done.

"Thank you," said Mr. Stephens after each talk, sometimes highlighting what he found interesting with further questions, praising consistently, and congratulating the class on being "good sports" and for being so cooperative. This kind of personally revealing activity he knew was accepted by these "newbies" much more easily on this first day of class. They would harden soon enough.

"Ladiez ant gentlemen, thiis is Ming!" A voice rang out like gentle bells, each syllable carefully shaped and strung together with the next in an exotic rhythm, tantalizingly different than the homogenized elocution students pick up from TV. The words poured out, not glibly, but teasingly. Stephens looked up. He focused his ears. The trained antibodies in his mind turned critical, but could find no flaws. He was not proud of his tendency to seek flaws in other people, but he had been aware of it since breaking up with a girlfriend in high school. Here he was, doing it again. Surely there were failings of presentation that would give him back control of his own thoughts.

The speech was delivered by a slender girl, her head thrown back, her brown face framed by shoulder-length, almost black hair draped straight from a part in the middle. Unlike the other presenters, she was smiling while she spoke—not just the intermittent shy grin of some other students, but a beaming look that lit up her face. This young lady actually liked speaking in front of the class, and didn't mind showing it.

He drank in the flow of words, trying to pin down the accent. It was not a Spanish accent, he was certain. There weren't the hard "ee" sounds of Hispanic immigrants. Nor were there the common grammatical errors that betrayed the speech of all recent English language learners. Her robust enunciation of each word showed good training in English, and her voice was strong. As she trumpeted her way through her presentation, Stephens' curiosity swelled.

She was taller than most of the Asian girls, and her hair dropped in a gentle wave along the graceful line of her jaw in profile, its brown more like dark chocolate than ebony. The delicate brown skin of her face was drawn over high cheekbones that gave a symmetrical cast to her countenance. Her large, round, deep brown eyes perched on perfectly balanced scales. Her unabashed smile, shared so generously with the class, was the kind dentists use to shame us into regular checkups, Stephens thought. He wanted to watch her more, but she had finished.

"Young lady, you should consider a career in television journalism!"

He knew right away it was an awkward thing to say. Had he tactlessly betrayed his private enthusiasm for her speech? Being uniformly supportive was good, he knew, but being excessively complimentary of one student's performance was not. It was out of character, too, since he had studied journalism in college, and he understood very well that "on-air" people were judged by weird standards that emphasize homogenized appearance and unoffensive attractiveness over writing skill and intelligence.

Ralph Stephens had come to teaching later in life. After a brief job with a small town newspaper, he had worked political staff jobs, ghostwriting speeches and articles about public schools. After years of pushing opinions on what should be taught, how teachers should be managed, and how schools should be paid for, he grew tired of a subject for which the truth seemed always to lie somewhere over the next horizon. Meanwhile, his own children entered the school system. As they approached high school age, Stephens realized he was aging, too. He looked around and saw few people of his demographic in his work world, and none he might consider a role model. While he still could, he took the added college courses required to become a high

school teacher.

In the early years, it was teenagers at home, and more teenagers at work. But, as he told his students, it had been his choice.

"I could have spent the rest of my life doing dumb things for silly people, like in the real jobs I've had, or I could spend my days in your exciting company," he said with a generous smile.

He expected the blank looks. He now had enough experience to accept that students don't have to understand everything a teacher says. After almost five years, he was hitting his stride. He had a feel both for the goals of teaching, and for its compromise with the possible. He knew some teachers who claimed they "hated" their job, and others who longed for their day of retirement, but he didn't feel that way at all. He also knew teachers with a sterling opinion of their own skills and influence, who somehow remained impervious to the reality doses dished out daily in the world's most humbling profession. These were the people who judged themselves and their colleagues by one irrefutable standard: their own. They were the most threatening to the school environment, to students, and to other teachers, because they were not aware of their own poisonous influence.

It wasn't until her partner introduced her that Stephens traced the accent to the Philippines. Listening intently, he heard Ming say her partner's name was Karita, and she had gone to elementary school in the Philippines before coming to America just a few short years ago.

Over the following weeks, school moved through its expected cycle as it always did, but with one striking exception in Ralph Stephens' mind: student Karita did *everything* well. She consistently had the highest scores on multiple choice tests; her written papers were both thoughtful and interesting; even the most trivial homework was executed with such care and confidence that Stephens found himself thinking perhaps his assignments themselves were more profoundly conceived than he had understood them to be. He secretly treasured the sound of her voice as she strutted musically through the freshman prose of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," and Stephen Vincent Benét's "By the Waters of Babylon." He avoided his first mistake of excessive praise, but that was all in his mind. With praise or without, Karita excelled quietly, independently, and naturally, without a trace of self-consciousness or pride.

Stephens himself had been a top student in high school in his own time. Somehow—and he really didn't understand how—he had developed good study habits. As a teacher he understood now how study habits determine success in any endeavor, but as a preteen he had really just stumbled into a routine of taking some time in the evening to read and think about his classes. He had learned a secret in his teen years: a mind can retain and access an immense body of knowledge if the mind adopts a pattern for its storage. Stephens convinced himself that Karita, too, had discovered this secret. Even her homework—answers to questions about what the class was reading, paragraphs of reflection, descriptions of personal experiences—was usually typed. He read into that a level of focus, thinking, and diligence that he recognized as his own. He, too, would have typed his work daily, had personal computers been on the scene back in the day.

She was a very rare blend of positive qualities. She was pretty, but not at all showy, dressed always in the standard loose-fitting hooded sweatshirt, looking drab but neat in subdued earth tones: navy blue, dark brown, and black. She was smart, but not lofty; all the other students—the needy, the superior, the obnoxious, and the indifferent—were happy to be teamed with her for group work. She was quiet, but not silent or subdued.

His admiration fed on itself. The more he watched her, the more sensitive he became to her special gifts—and the more he sensed his own special ability to appreciate those gifts. He was making himself uncomfortable with this line of thinking, but he told himself he wanted nothing from her, no acknowledgment, no reciprocation. He didn't want to get to know her—he knew her. It was not a relationship to be shared; it was on a spiritual plane, unrequited because there was no need, limited to his interaction with her as her teacher, the same level of interaction as he had with any of the other 150 teenagers that composed the living, vibrant mosaic of his day. There was no denying, however, that he looked forward to each day when he might see her.

In his mind, Stephens found he could not think of her by her given name. As a high school English teacher, he often quipped he was no stranger to symbolism, and couldn't avoid the meta-cognitive realization that he had given birth to a personal symbol. It was not unusual for him to challenge students who sloppily dropped the word 'symbolism' into their analyses with the reprimand, "Don't tell me it's a symbol without telling me what the symbol represents!" It tore at him, it intimidated him, it mocked him, but he could not answer his own question: what does this person represent?

Dozing in his favorite recliner in the living room one evening in late September, Stephens' eye fell upon an object among the bric-a-brac in a glass-doored display case in a corner of the room. Surely he had seen it before. It had probably been on that shelf for years, but he could not remember where it came from. Most likely it had come with the case itself from his mother-in-law's house on the East Coast. It was a dark brown figurine of the Buddha in carved wood, and he thought immediately of his student Karita. Stephens opened the case and picked it up. It was heavy for its size. He had seen many illustrations of the Buddha, but this one had a markedly feminine face. Under its base were carved the words, "Gentle Buddha." He saw why he had thought of his student: the mahogany color, the fine features, the high cheek bones, and a modest, ethereal

smile all seemed to match that construct evolving in his mind. Without a conscious decision, Ralph Stephens began thinking of his student as "my Buddha."

The weeks marched through the Fall. The sun spitefully shortened its daily stay. Temperatures slowly dropped from the diabolical to the humane. Tree leaves began to turn color. Students went to Friday night football games and endured the forced fervor of the "homecoming" celebrations and dance. Stephens never understood the origin of "homecoming" when he had been in high school many years ago, and the concept made even less sense now in a school populated predominantly by students from broken homes. Home was the last place many of his students wanted to go, and the campus buzzed for hours every day after school with the energy of students putting off as long as possible their own daily homecoming.

As Stephens listened to the voice of the world where he worked, the emotional demands of working all day with young people gradually filled the vacuum left by the withering of his own home life. His daughter was set to graduate from college, and her younger brother was in his second year and also living away from home. While both Stephens and his wife felt close to the children, he supposed she felt closer, probably because she needed that feeling, but also because Ralph had other children to occupy his thoughts. And hadn't they both substituted their own children for each other? When he didn't actively avoid thinking about his marriage, he could see his own children's role had progressed from a loving project of a lifetime, to a kind of glue that strained to hold their relationship together, to an unreliable putty they now used to fill the cracks and the voids in the heart they once had shared.

His Buddha led him through a new reading of all the time-honored standards of literature that made up the freshman curriculum in English. She became a mirror in which every story was reflected into something new and still more profound. In September the class read Richard Connell's thriller, "The Most Dangerous Game," and Stephens found himself casting Karita as Rainsford, the American adventurer who accidentally stumbles into the domain of Zaroff, the savage Cossack nobleman with his own personal island that he uses as a grim game reserve stocked with human prey. As the teacher, Stephens understood his students likely saw him as Zaroff, and they were the innocent sailors who wash ashore in his classroom—if they manage to survive the shipwrecks he engineers—all so he can enjoy hunting them down. He would play the role of the demented Russian, if that's what they wanted. He would make his classroom a reef-encircled island, the only refuge from an unforgiving, tempestuous sea, from whose beaches there was no escape. And Rainsford was to be the final pawn in the game! He was the most famous and skilled hunter Zaroff could have hoped for as quarry on his island. His Buddha was the mouse caught by the cat that enjoys tormenting his captive with an extended death game, never allowing it out of the cat's control, but in no hurry to bring the game to an end. Wasn't the game itself the joy, no matter how it turned out? Stephens felt a twinge of apprehension when he wondered if he, too, like Zaroff, was courting his own demise. Mustn't one of these "most dangerous game" prove to be his nemesis, matching his every move, countering his vile plan, maneuvering him into a pact of honor from which he could not escape? He had never had so much fun with this story!

In late October Stephens was walking to his classroom from the lunchroom when his eye caught his Buddha across the quad in a swarm of students. She was walking hand in hand with...a boy! In that moment of inattention, or distraction, Stephens' toe caught a concrete lip in the pavement, and the cardboard boat holding his lunch splatted onto the grass. He hardly noticed the students who helped him pick up the mess and put it in the plastic trash can nearby. Students have a special sense that detects and respects misfortune, but they said nothing as Stephens tried to make light of his clumsiness. Had he masked his shock? He hoped so, while in his mind he shrieked. Nooo! Can't you see? Don't throw yourself away like this! That...person...can't know the real you! Stephens was known for often inveighing against using the "b" word—boyfriend—in class. He believed, and often said, he had never seen a high school relationship that benefited the girlfriend, and he felt even more vehemently protective toward his Buddha. The only thing that going with this boy can accomplish is to destroy you! Breathing hard, he tried not to be too obvious about looking down and straight ahead on the sidewalk to his classroom. No lunch for Mr. Stephens today!

The time came to read the poignant James Hurst short story, "The Scarlet Ibis," about a beautiful, if helpless, boy-child born into a sickly body somewhere in the lush sensory excesses of the depression-era Deep South. In his mind, Stephens accepted the role of the painfully normal older brother, who understood the prerogative of the firstborn to be the teacher, that is, to inflict his own traditional, unoriginal idea of good character and values on his subordinate sibling. Yet, this "teacher" who tells the story remains nameless throughout, while the weak, younger brother becomes known affectionately to his family as Doodle. Like Doodle, Stephens' Buddha was suffused with natural poetry, and everything she touched seemed beautiful, not in an ordinary way, but in unexpected ways he couldn't understand or explain. Stephens supposed that his role as the teacher was to help build his students' character, to instill a resilience that would make them stronger and better prepared to survive the cold expectations and sometimes bitter realities of a heartless world. He looked at his Buddha and knew that was not happening. Yes, he was a trained teacher, but he had been trained for a role for which there is no training. Yes, he

had experience, he had experience teaching, and at the very least he had "life experience," but he saw little value in it. In fact, his experience made him feel more like the innocently arrogant brother in the story, who naturally assumed *his* world was reality, and undertook to make Doodle conform to it by toughening him up and training him to run faster and to swim further. All the while he secretly wished to enter the enchanted universe of the fragile Doodle, but he didn't know this until he left him alone to die on a muddy path in the woods in a driving Southern rain. It was he, Brother, who was left behind to mix his tears with the heartless raindrops. Stephens had read this story many times before with his English classes, and he always choked up a bit in the emotional wringer of its powerful conclusion. This time, however, felt different. He searched desperately through his functional vocabulary—of which he was inordinately and embarrassingly proud—to settle on a more literary synonym for what he could only think of as...self pity.

In November Stephens collected the journal notebooks from all his classes. He scanned them to give credit to those who were up-to-date on the assignments calling for unstructured, diary-style reflections on questions based on their reading or current events. He didn't evaluate or grade these journals because they were intended more as brainstorming than exercises in essay writing. The students got credit for their "stream of consciousness," unstructured thoughts. He sometimes succumbed to the temptation to look randomly through the pages of handwriting, a voyeur peeking into his students' secrets, but he was a bit less than random when he looked through his Buddha's booklet. He stumbled upon a page dedicated to pain. He couldn't remember assigning that topic—in fact he was pretty rigorous about avoiding any trigger for negative thoughts for these journal assignments. However, students were encouraged to free-associate, and while he was curious where her thoughts may have started on that day, Stephens felt uncomfortable lingering on the passage. His hasty perusal left him with mixed feelings.

It was clear the boy was out of the picture, and that was a relief, but the misery about the breakup that came through his Buddha's writing was clear and intense. His eyes raced over the lines of neat script. His mind crowded with instantaneous impressions. There was no self pity, no whining in the writing. He admired it, almost envied it. Could he be so clear headed? Had he that much presence of mind and maturity at that point in his life when he first suffered emotional pain? Could he cope with it now if somehow he encountered a situation like the one she described? What reason did he have to believe he was more mature or more capable of handling reversal? He had wanted to shield her from this experience he had known was coming, but he knew that was silly. He knew there was nothing he could do about it, although he wished desperately there were. It was all he could do to fight the urge to photocopy those two handwritten pages. How had she managed to write this way? He wanted to study her technique, to reread and study the text. The image of a shield rose from his stream of thoughts and he watched it turn on himself. There was a knot in his soul that would not allow him to go back and read a second time any of his Buddha's journal. He closed the booklet and tossed it onto the stack on the shelf.

As the Christmas holiday approached, the class read O Henry's timeless story, "The Gift of the Magi," savoring the irony of the young married couple in turn-of-the-century New York who sacrifice their proudest possessions to present their lover with the perfect gift. The story is timeless because their best intentions serve little purpose except as expressions of the deepest love, and isn't that the greatest gift of all? Stephens had read the story many times before, but this time it crashed through his frozen subconscious like an navy icebreaker. On the eve of the school's final day before the two-week winter holiday, Stephens had a disturbing dream. In it, he and his Buddha had decided to find the perfect gifts for each other. Why would they do this? It was a way to recognize each other. After all, it *was* a dream! After much thought and consideration, Stephens decided to sacrifice what he valued most about his own character: the wisdom and experience acquired through a lifetime of teaching and learning. He did this so he could join his Buddha in her incarnation as a young woman of high school age by becoming a matching young man of high school age. With great anticipation he practically ran to school in the morning. When he burst into the familiar classroom he could not find his Buddha. Instead he found curious and confused looks on the faces of his students as they stared at him and at a woman of middle age he had never seen before. When these two objects of the students' attention caught each others' eye, Stephens recognized his Buddha! Everything went cold. Time paused. His breaths ceased with the illusion of hibernating underwater, an illusion shattered when finally grasped what had happened. His Buddha had followed the same thought process as had he, and, in complete purity of intention, had matched his sacrifice. Gone were her youth and innocence in her wish to join him in his incarnation as an adult with a good heart. The class saw a 15-year-old boy and a woman they all assumed was his mother, staring at each other while time waited to resume its relentless march. Neither could speak. And then the woman calmly turned around and walked through the door and out of his dream.

The winter holiday break, once so desperately anticipated in his early years of teaching, this year dragged on as Ralph Stephens dodged and feinted through his real life. Both his children stayed at the house; his daughter and her new fiancée visited for a weekend, and his son, kicked out of the dormitory for the break, renewed his residence in his old bedroom. It seemed to Stephens that the family's modest, ranch house had shrunk as the family itself grew and then

aged. Its three-dimensional space, as measured in cubic feet, surely was the same, but its psychic space had followed some Einstein-inspired diminishment in the time-space continuum. Only so much human energy could be housed in it, and he felt his share diminish as each day of the break trudged by. For days at a time he felt gone, simply not there. He was not sorry when the vacation was over, although he felt some apprehension about returning to the domain of his Buddha.

The high point of Ralph Stephens' year came in February when the school paper ran a light feature story on the varied factors that determine a student's mood for the day. For some of the students quoted, those factors came at home in the glow of warm family support; for others, their emotional well-being was shaped more by their experiences after arriving on campus in the morning. Stephens hadn't noticed the article until he overheard students talking about Karita's comments in it. He soon found a copy and looked it over at his desk after school. There was his Buddha saying that her mood started on a positive note each day because of her first period class and all the fine people in it. She was in his class first period!

All his thoughts and musings about his Buddha had simmered only in the deepest pits of secrecy. He had never doubted for a moment that his contemplation of his Buddha might resemble obsession to somebody else, and would quite likely be seriously misinterpreted. He kept his direct conduct with her at the highest professional level, and was so uncomfortable around her, so careful not to reveal any untoward familiarity, that he sometimes wondered if she thought there was something wrong with him. But her comment was a sign! He greedily read into it that there was a positive relationship where he had feared there had been only some poetic, symbolic excess. He struggled to stay calm, to take it in stride, but he secretly clung to the affirmation. She cared!

Winter's thaw brought the class to Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," and its indulgence in the passions of youth, its legitimization of love at first sight, and its absurd climax that any reasonable, real person could—or not?—so easily manage to avoid. Aside from introducing to his now 15-year-old students the mechanics of human life, from consummating marriage to weaning an infant, there was so much poetry to ponder! Stephens felt awkwardly selfish about the thrill he sensed as he drew up his lesson plans. He would, of course require each student to memorize and recite one of the play's monologues, not only because he could still remember Portia's admonition that "the quality of mercy is not strained...," but also because he was convinced memorization made the lines the students' own, and left them just slightly more empowered, at least verbally, to confront challenges in their own dramas.

So how would the play's famous scenes reflect off his Buddha's shining light? Was it fair to expect her to cast a new light on a classic about two children the same age as his freshman students? The ritual of "teaching" the play included enacting selected scenes from the play, since it was, of course, written for the stage. There was always the peril that teenagers' unintended boorishness could plunge the sublime into the grotesque, but that's why teachers get paid the big bucks, he thought. Laughing awkwardly out loud at blood and violence is an understandable coping strategy not confined to teenagers. Obtuse mumbling through lines of ecstatic intimacy is a price one pays when young lips are asked to whisper lines that date back four centuries.

This time the play was different, but not in any way Stephens had expected. Before the group assigned to present the first act even got to the Capulets' party, where Romeo first meets Juliet, the play was derailed by the mental breakdown of Romeo's best friend, Mercutio. Stephens felt he had come up with a fairly brilliant idea several years earlier when he assigned each student to make a color illustration of a single image selected from the dozens of shocking verbal pictures contained in Mercutio's psychotic rant about "Queen Mab." Drawing pictures, or composing collages of downloaded images, would help the more visual learners relate to the dense iambic pentameter of Shakespeare's poetry, Stephens reasoned. Not one student had yet drawn a savage Tinkerbell, as Mercutio described her, ripping through everyone's dreams, maliciously making subconscious wishes come true in ways most vile. They tended naturally to draw the safer pictures: "an agate stone" ring on a finger; a whip, although it never looked anything life a "cricket's bone"; a carriage that looks like a hazel nut; and oblivious, literal depictions of grasshopper wings, small spider webs, and "wat'ry beams" of moonlight, usually just yellow smears on some blue smudge.

Meanwhile, the fairy Queen Mab teases lawyers, preachers, and lobbyists to indulge their natural greediness. She dances across the necks of sleeping soldiers and they dream of slitting foreign throats for glory. She touches the mouths of maidens who then dream of kisses, while their lips fester with blisters. She becomes a monster who brutally violates any maids who happen to fall asleep on their backs. What dream might she inflict upon the napping teacher? Stephens felt the sting of a sucker punch nightmare, and what he saw was a disastrous case of generation gap. Like best friends from time immemorial, Mercutio tried to warn Romeo about what lay ahead, that youthful dreams of love and intimacy can suffer only abortive distortion and repulsive putrification as age and reality lay inevitable claim to the sweet musings of the innocent.

As he leafed absentmindedly through the rumpled stack of drawings and color print-outs, checking quickly for color and a fitting caption from the Queen Mab speech, Stephens abruptly found himself staring in shock at a picture of a young woman's head, tilted back, with blonde bangs brushing past

eyes wide open with shock, and what appeared to be a huge Twinkie pastry jammed into her wide open mouth. This was so random...and suggestive? Neatly printed beneath the startling image was the required line, "*Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are."* Sweetmeats? Stephens quickly checked Google to confirm his recollection that a sweetmeat was "an item of confectionery or sweet food," but something told him there was more going on here. With a sense of dread he clicked into the Urban Dictionary, which listed a series of modern applications of the term, each one more obscenely graphic than the one before. His imagination roiling with upsetting images, a frightening thought slapped him across his face. Who had turned in this paper? Clumsily he turned the Twinkie shot over, and a quiet moan of relief escaped him. No, it was not his Buddha, but another girl named Renée, a good student, but one to whom Stephens had paid little attention until now. He wasn't sure what he should think. On its own, her assignment was cleverly executed. Was it a plea for attention? If so, how many other students in the class had sensed his preoccupation with his Buddha and were coyly biding their time, waiting for the opportunity to prod him with a Galvanic jolt?

And now Stephens watched *Romeo and Juliet* tear itself into two tragedies: one for the teenagers, filled with excess and passion in a world not of their making; and another for the adults, filled with fear and helplessness in a world they had created but could no longer control. For the teens, the formula is simple. As Juliet tells Romeo, the more love she gives, the more she has. It is a beautiful mathematical function that Stephens knew should be true, but would his students, and his Buddha, believe it?

The adults, however, are blind. Juliet's nurse has no compunction about using memories of Juliet's infancy to humiliate her now. Juliet's parents coldly prepare her for the marriage they have deemed best for the family's interests. Still worse, Stephens could not help seeing himself as the meddling, pandering Friar Laurence, who rips into Romeo, calling his claims of love a "hollow perjury," and calling him a "form of wax" and a powder horn set afire by his own ignorance. Small wonder, when the Friar prescribes a special drug to help Juliet convince her family she is dead, that she wonders aloud whether the vial actually contains a poison. Stephens groaned when the Friar, following the discovery of the two lovers' bodies at the play's end, explains how his meddling led to the double suicide. It is the play's longest speech, and he begins his rant with "I will be brief." Oh, God!

By May, the school year's ninth and final month, Ralph Stephens felt exhausted. He liked to end the year with Homer's *The Odyssey*, partly because only a tiny fraction of the work appeared in their aging textbooks, making for a quick unit, and partly because the kids were ready for a light fantasy in a world where every weirdo gets his own island. So there he was, lounging on the island of Calypso, a captive taking full advantage of his beautiful, love-struck nymph. His Calypso was his Buddha, holding him captive in his own fantasy. After this year on her island he, Odysseus, was finally feeling some impatience to move on. He led the class through a lesson covering the opening of Homer's classic, where Odysseus finally tires of his ten years imprisoned by the pleasures of his goddess, and then Stephens played a song by Suzanne Vega presented in the text book as a supplement to the epic poem. He found the song interesting because it is sung from the perspective of Calypso, who has an attitude very different from what Homer seems to portray as the mindset of the epic hero, Odysseus.

The students were asked to listen, follow the lyrics in the text, and then complete a brief writing assignment on different ways to view Calypso's character. As they went to work, Stephens busied himself grading some of the term's final papers.

That day after school, with the door to his room wide open, Stephens was still sitting at his desk with wrinkled piles of binder paper before him, grading furiously. He looked up to see Karita walk through the door with her friend Renée.

"Mr. Stephens," his Buddha said, "Could I ask you to play that song again?"

Stephens looked at her without speaking. This had never happened before. His Buddha had never come in after school to talk to him and he was having trouble understanding that she was actually standing in front of him, making a simple request.

"Mr. Stephens?"

He blinked, and the words finally leapt out.

"Yes, of course!" he said, hoping he hadn't shouted.

He stood up, walked over to the media table, and cued up the song for the two girls. As the haunting, opening notes drifted out from the speakers, he left them and returned to his desk, and opened the text to take another look at the lyrics. Why, he kept asking himself, had she returned to hear the song a second time? This was extraordinary!

His eyes ran quickly over the column of centered lines.

My name is Calypso....

He listened to the tremulous voice. He pried the notes apart, feverishly searching for a clue to what had attracted his Buddha. Did she hear it as her own voice? Of course, she understands. She sees the role as clearly as I do, he thought.

I knew that he was drowning
And I brought him into me.

Okay, that's a bit bold, but we are looking at poetry here. What was his Buddha trying to say? Which words was she struggling to adapt as her own? How did she know I was drowning?

The sand will sting my feet
And the sky will burn
It's a lonely time ahead

He asked himself if there were something he could say

to her to help. But then the song finished, and there was a silence while Stephens continued to pore over the page, assembling and disassembling different interpretations of Calypso's pain.

"Thank you very much," he heard his Buddha say politely. Both girls had stood up and grabbed their packs.

"Good bye, Mr. Stephens," Karita said, tossing the words over her shoulder as she and Renée walked out the door.

Now today

Come morning light

He sails away...

A pounding silence had invaded the room. The text book slammed itself shut before him, and he pushed it away.

I will stand upon the shore

With a clean heart

And my song in the wind

Once again, he had it all wrong. It was his Buddha who had just sailed away. She was the brave Odysseus, and he was the abandoned Calypso desperately putting her feelings in order. Odysseus was ready to leave the island and anxious to venture into the world, wiser and stronger, ready for adventures undreamt of by his captor on the island.

I let him go.

A tear plopped on the papers strewn across Mr. Ralph Stephens' desk. The melange of handwriting before him had dissolved from letters of black on white to grey fuzzy squiggles. He reached for his cheater glasses and found them already on his nose.

Of course. It was his job, his calling. He had let her go.

He rubbed his eyes and looked around at the island surrounding him. Today it seemed a desolate, hostile place, a place where the cruel Greek gods conspired to confine him.

He understood, but it did not help. He had no choice but to sing into the wind and stand on the shore with a clean heart.