

WRITING ON THE EDGE

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The Guy It Happens To

Rob Schnelle

Stan Tooey's vita reads like a treatise on academic crossbreeding. Grafted onto his Master of Fine Arts in Music and his B.S. in Chemistry, Stan's Ph.D. in American Studies suggests a fertile and heterodox mind. As for his work history, the many courses he has taught in painting, anthropology, and nature writing fortify his image as a scholar of eclectic tastes—he's even taught GIS mapping. Absent from the resumé but well known to acquaintances are Stan's burgeoning family, including kids, a wife, his mother-in-law, and too many dogs to support. Yet somehow he makes time to play in a pick-up jazz combo, and when he's not blowing horn he trains for marathons. Stan Tooey lacks nothing to keep him busy and interested. His problem is how to prop up the bulwarks of his life without a real job.

I know my friend's biography like the flotsam of my own desk drawer, having shared an office with him for the past three years. Voluble and often engaging, Stan, like me, works as an adjunct English lecturer at a regional state university. This means he earns half a salary for teaching a full load of courses and gets by without frills like health insurance. Most households supported by adjuncts, Stan's included, teeter on the leery edge of bohemia. Some of us live like graduate students for a few years before moving on; others can't find an exit. The upside of our status is that we help keep tuition affordable for the masses, costing our university about \$20,000 each in exchange for nine months of teaching. The registrar packs 'em in, we run them through (as humanely as possible), and then, when summer rolls around, we jerk lattes.

Why do we do it? For me, the answer is simple: I'm married to a woman with a middle-class paycheck. No such luck for the Tooeys. Stan's wife Alix keeps house and cares for their twin girls (a pair of hellions), but given the lean bacon her husband brings home, Fern and Prairie qualify for the county Head Start program, taking reduced-fee lunches at school and clothes from St. Vincent de Paul. The kids' teeth need fixing.

Yet it's not want of ambition that cripples Stan's career. To fill his teaching schedule, Stan adjuncts for Music and Geography as well as English, ensuring himself a crushing line-up of course preps. Meanwhile, he applies for tenure-track jobs all over the country, 34 of them during the past two years. When off duty from teaching and scouring

the employment lists, Stan supplements his income doing canine enforcement for the city. Saturday mornings while I'm stirring coffee, he'll be out collaring strays and spearing condoms in Railroad Park.

"It's very discouraging," says Stan, wolfing a sandwich between class periods. I pause over a stack of papers to listen. "Adjuncts are the invisible faculty. As long as outsiders don't know we exist, the university exploits us. There's no union and the tenured people see us as a threat." Stan nudges the volume control on his office boombox—we've had complaints. "The crux of it," he continues, "is that along with everything else they shove down our throats, there's been this horrible decline in standards—"

"Mm."

"The identity politics, the technology fetishes—anything goes but genuine academic rigor. You show up for an interview, and do they care what you think about Emerson or Aldo Leopold? Not as long as you've got Hypertext under your belt."

"Did you know 'Dante' is a computer language?"

"Well, exactly. Combine realities like these with the new, top-down business model, and you end up with an intractable set of problems. Frankly, I don't see the climate of higher ed improving."

Despite his worried tone, Stan is lecturing on themes familiar to us both. He's tireless in exposition, bucking himself up on a hobbyhorse of talk and towing me along for the ride. Not that I object—nobody in the English department listens to him but me and, I assume, vice versa—but if I don't cut him off, Stan winds up sprinting to class, and he can't afford to be late. I see him now as a cartoon image in which the subject's movements are indicated by triple outlines joined at the waist: one gazing speculatively toward the ceiling, another making earnest eye contact, and a third glancing hurriedly at his watch. Grievances consume Stan's time and energy, distracting us both and bleeding our work of its occasional, gratuitous pleasures. Abruptly, he's on his way out the door, though a moment later he returns for the cassette player lying on his desk. It's a composition class he's headed for, and to entertain the students Stan has taped an anthology of modal jazz. Complicating his role as posterboy for high standards, he has been known to fill an hour with slides of Sixties concert posters.

But if Stan Tooley sounds like a wing nut, likely to get screwed, he *is* highly qualified. Anyone as lavishly credentialed as Stan depends on good hardware, and I've heard students praise his learning. Thanks to all the exercise he gets, he is also a lean, mean machine, his forty-three year-old's paunch held in check by distance running and laps at the city pool. Otherwise, with his scanty hair and cherubic grin, Stan resembles the playwright Wallace Shawn.

Whatever my friend does with class time, I feel, the university comes out ahead. You get what you pay for, right? Unfortunately, when students leave a composition course knowing more about Thelonus Monk than paragraph development, word gets around. Sundberg, our department chair, recently told Stan to teach the curriculum or forfeit his contract next term. But even with a mortgage on the Tooeyes' ranch house at stake, Stan's in no hurry to change. I'm no help to him, either. A textbook codependent, I vacillate between cautioning my friend and feeding his weakness. Anyway, Stan's denial reflex fends off any hint I might drop that his dislike for teaching—the trench work of planning, grading, syllabus writing and the rest—endangers his cause.

"It's a question of academic freedom," Stan insists. "Sundberg pays lip service to creative ideas, but his policies demand this lockstep pedagogy. If they can't keep track of your every move, they assume you're unproductive." Stan is back from class now, having released his students for "independent work" in the library. Half listening, I note that his weakness for the plural, third-person pronoun has taken root.

"See, they're operating on a mechanistic ethos. It's all about the priorities of administrators who aren't concerned with critical thinking, grounding students in the humanities, or really *any* of the goals of liberal education." I haven't looked up from my work this time, so Stan rises and begins tacking what appear to be final grade lists to the outside of our office door. With a full week remaining in the term, his industry seems miraculous. I'm aware, though, that he gives no exams and closes up shop with optional student presentations.

"Think you should wait a bit before posting those, Stan? It might be misinterpreted."

"But that's exactly the response they want from us—if you don't submit to protocol, you're black-listed." I shrug while Stan drives home another coffin nail. I've got essays to grade.

By Friday afternoon, Stan is less sure of himself. A job prospect in Kansas failed to pan out, and the complications of home life have given him a haggard look. "Alix and I share a lot in common, but the money issue is a strain. We're just scraping by." Stan and I are drinking beer at Finbar's, a downtown club with brick walls and vinyl armchairs. "Last night I was lying in bed," he says. "I couldn't get to sleep, and then I noticed the room was shaking. At first I thought there was an earthquake, but it was me shaking the *bed*. I was so tense my sides ached. I couldn't stop trembling." Stan tells me about a recurring dream in which he finds himself tumbling from the crown of a pine tree. He's snapping off branches as he falls, thinking the next layer of canopy will break his plunge while the ground keeps receding. "When the supports go, you go, too. The only question is how far you fall before you hit

bottom." I appreciate moments like this, not because I like painful disclosures, but because Stan's suffering appears less acute when he drops his bluster. The air between us clears without "the binaristic dualities that characterize our milieu," for instance, the whole gas bladder of professor talk that often warps his thinking. Curiously, Stan is an accomplished poet. I've read the chapbook he published in graduate school, a collection of fine, incisive verses hinging on metaphors of soil and forest succession. But somewhere along the gypsy itinerary the Tooeyes have traveled, touching down in distant states and moving on through a series of temporary teaching jobs, Stan embraced one of the creepier spoken dialects of academia. Now he channels it through the spleen, insisting that "to privilege antithetical thought-structures is to assert a paradoxical ambivalence."

Poetry didn't pay off for Stan, but neither does acting, least of all the role he's chosen. The *infant terrible* may be alive and well in higher education, but not among adjuncts. Ask Stan to comment on tenured prima-donnas, though (or don't; he'll tell you anyway), and you're likely to hear about our department's professor of Theory, whose grants obviate his teaching more than a course or two a year. He'll also give you the dope on the "compositionist" who writes incomprehensible memos, whose cadre of personal assistants (read: paper graders) costs the department more than it pays out for adjuncts. These are the small fry. The biggest bellies at the trough, Stan points out, belong to administrators, including a president who starves academic programs, then spends \$250,000 remodeling the executive residence. Ever more emboldened with fat salaries and elaborate titles, the administration has swollen by 29 percent since we've been here. Stan can dish it to these people all he wants.

I know—fraud and privilege are hardly unique to universities, and they're probably no worse at ours than elsewhere. But when alarms are raised you have to wonder why adjuncts take the heat. Chicken feed that I am, I try to cultivate my own garden as Voltaire said we should, and outwardly comply. Just give me your objectives, a group of students, and a room with a chalkboard—I'll do the job.

Stan explodes. He melts down in department meetings (or doesn't show up); he turns a class on expository writing into a poetry roundtable; he places himself outside the information loop and reads policies as personal affronts. Nothing defeats the man like his resistance to playing the only game in town. "Tooey, you mule!" I want to shout, "if you keep this up you'll be out of your job, your house, and probably your marriage!" But convincing Stan that details count would be like telling Willy Loman you can't sell personal charm. Men live and die for the sacred honor of opinions, Stan's being that in a bad world only bad guys

win. its orrisnoot—that failure is the sign of integrity—means that guys like Stan can't lose.

What eats me about Stan Tooey is the self destruction behind his acts of face-saving. As with most of us, his reserves of appeal, his hireability for that matter, may depend on stamina. How will his genial countenance and offbeat sense of humor hold up when he gets the ax? On the day when our building's heat fails, this is a fellow who opens the door of the office fridge to "let in a blast of warm air"; somebody whose living room is a canine halfway house, a George Booth image of goofy, tail-thumping eccentricity. Once, as we sat watching our kids at the city pool, Alix told me about finding her husband talking to a hummingbird. Having been attracted by a pair of red handlebar knobs in the Tooeys' garage, the tiny creature was beating its wings against the surface of a windowpane. Instead of shooing it out with a broom, Stan approached quietly, waiting with extended hands until the hummer calmed itself. Finally, after it perched on his finger, he walked it to the open door. "I'm just so glad he's the kind of guy this happens to," Alix said. Her voice was raw as, in her place, mine would be too.

A Tuesday evening in the Mt. Anthony School parking lot: I'm jawing with Stan after a PTA function. Clouds on a stiff wind blow in from the Cascades to our west, but Stan holds me hostage by leaning against the driver's door of my car.

"I don't know," he says. "I suppose I'll lobby to be reinstated. Sundberg seems to have it in for me."

"Contracts are the Personnel Committee's decision, aren't they?"

"Well, they recommend the adjunct pool, but there must be other people who support me."

"Have you got a back-up?"

"Nothing certain, but I've been on the phone to Geldon College, and I think they're impressed. The main obstacle now would be their diversity mandate, because in other ways my prospects look favorable. The program there is humanities oriented with an emphasis on student initiative, and, you know, I could see us living in the Santa Fe area."

Fern runs up in a half-crouch, shielding her head from the weather with a pizza box. "Daddy, Mom says if you don't come right now, we're going to leave you."

"Okay, tell her I'll be right there.... On the other hand," he continues, "I might call my dissertation advisor in Ann Arbor. Networking is bound to pay off sooner or later."

"Well, I don't want to keep you here all night," I say, jockeying for the door handle. The wind cuts through us, spattering our faces with raindrops.

"Then again, I could always do some more coursework to enhance my portfolio"—"Daddy!" Fern calls from the car window now: "We're going!"

"Just a minute," he shouts, but before Stan can finish outlining his plan, Alix revs the engine of their old Subaru and pulls out into traffic. "Well, I guess I'll hoof it," he says, flashing a hair-shirt grin. I offer to give him a lift but he waves me off. He has an errand he wants to see about in the neighborhood—somebody's selling science fiction paperbacks—and so I leave him there in the parking lot. My mirror shows Stan growing smaller as he hunkers into the rain.



Rob Schnelle teaches at Central Washington University.