

# REBODY

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*"It is a curious paradox that almost all science fiction, however far removed in time and space, is really about the present day."*

- J.G. Ballard, "Vermillion Sands", 1971.

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Sir Isaac Newton is supposed to have remarked that his scientific achievements were due to the fact that he stood on the shoulders of giants. In science fiction we stand also on the shoulders of giants.

With thanks to Prof. Hugh Fox.

# 1

I've been sitting for ten minutes staring at the term paper of Yolanda Lopez Navarro, one of my English students here at Lady Guinevere College, San Antonio. What grade should I give? E? E minus? As a teacher I have failed, for she seems incapable of writing proper English. Every sentence is riddled with Spanish words.

Across the bottom Yolanda has written:

"I sorry, Professor Hugh. I study hard but writing the Inglés, it difícil." And, alarmingly, she has imprinted a kiss in peach lipstick.

I tuck the term paper out of sight under the others, and look about nervously. How will I deal with this? Truly, my results are awful. My class on Joyce and Dunleavey seems impenetrable to this student generation.

Yolanda is about five eight, I guess, looks French, and makes a pair of jeans and a baggy sweatshirt look Paris-chic. She's from a little town south of Monterrey, Mexico, that was conquered by the French at some time in history. That's as much as I know. Except: she scares the hell out of me.

There's no getting around the grade problem. If I flunk her my pass rate will drop below acceptable, and I'll be up in front of the Dean. Then, bang goes my tenure! I'll have to give her an oral exam. Oh, I can't even write that without the immediate double-meaning. Let's see; a verbal exam. That's better.

Can't use my office. Cram myself into a cubbyhole with Yolanda? I'm getting hot just thinking about it. Woah.

Where? Where can I take Yolanda to administer an, umm, verbal exam, which will be quiet and private enough and yet have other people there? Maybe a coffeshop or something. There's the Moon poetry group, that meets every full moon at the Latte Day Coffee bar, on the Riverwalk.

I dig around in my desk drawer and pull out a 'What's On' flyer I picked up at Barnes & Noble just yesterday.

Here it is. A guy called Bob Miker runs it. They meet tomorrow. I'll send Yolanda an email.

\* \* \*

Later:

**From:** Yolanda  
**To:** Professor Hugh  
**Subject:** Verbal Exam

Dear Prof,  
 Gracias por la second chance!  
 See you at the coffee bar!  
 Adios, Yolanda.

\* \* \*

Two fifteen, Friday afternoon. I sit here in my tiny cubbyhole at the back of the library, entering my student grades into a geriatric PC running a version of the operating system from the previous decade. It's so obsolete that I have to carry a list of the keyboard controls to move around the data screens.

Yolanda's exam grade is empty. It's the last piece of data I have to put in. Finally it's come down to this: Me, the grade computer, and Yolanda's exam.

I put in a C.

Then I erase it and enter a D. But I think of explaining to the Dean why my pass rate is still on the way

down, and delete the D and put a B minus. Then I upgrade all the other students one point, just to make sure.

What the hell difference does it make at the end of the day? School is bullshit anyway. The whole damn system is designed by the corporate rich. All they want is a steady flow of recently qualified grads, who will happily work for peanuts until they are tossed on the scrapheap when the new batch arrives. And here I am part of the system. How did this happen?

I escape from the grade program leaving Yolanda's B minus in place, pick up my tote bag, lock the office door, and make my way through the almost-deserted halls to the parking lot at the rear of the main building.

My pride and joy stands by itself on the back row of the lot. My two-year-old black Mitsubishi. I bought it at one of those Federal auctions, where they sell off all the gear they've confiscated from criminals. Otherwise I'd be running around in a three-year-old Ford Escort with no cruise control, like most of the other profs..

The Mitsu has black one-way windows, carpet that comes up to my ankles, a stereo system like a stage set, and massage seats. When I bought it, I found a tiny silver spoon dangling from the mirror. I think it belonged to some narco before the Feds. Sometimes I wonder if, one day, some wiry *moreno* with wrap-round mirror shades isn't going to accost me in a parking lot and demand his car back.

It's a blistering hot July afternoon. The moment I catch sight of the Mitsu, I point the clicker at it. Even though it only takes me twenty seconds to reach the car, that's twenty seconds the air conditioner has to reduce the temperature from 'third degree burns on contact' to 'ouch'.

I take 181 up to 410 and then along 410 for a while, until I reach Phantom Larches, where I live with Doobie, my dalmation bitch. Even before I park the Mitsu I can see an envelope jammed through my front door handle.

I think my blood pressure's rising. Yes. As I expected. The neighbor committee has fined me fifty dollars to go

into the communal security fund, for having had three warnings about the leaves on my front lawn not being removed 'in a timely manner'. Jeez. I wish my students could write that well.

Doobie starts barking even before I get the front door open. It's not the 'who the hell is that' bark, it's the 'hi there, it's me, doing my job' bark. That's better than coming home to an empty house. All traces of my very temporary wife disappeared almost as rapidly as she arrived in my life. I wasn't exciting enough for her. I won't write her name here. It's part of a pact I made with myself a while ago. The pact, roughly translated, goes: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die!"

\* \* \*

I park the Mitsu in the Marriott parking lot, go down the steps to the river, and arrive at the Latte Day just after eight o'clock. It's next to the Lighthouse café-bar.

The place is a low, rectangular building with a lot of windows.

I push the door open. A bell jangles as I enter. There's nobody in sight, I must be way too early. Oh well. I'll have a couple of drinks next door, and come back later.

\* \* \*

The bell jangles again as I open the door to the Latte Day. This time I hear the murmur of conversation. Potted plants and rococo vases of flowers fill the room. Tiny round tables cower between the foliage. There are three chairs per table, made from the light alloy that was popular before people got 'large', as they say nowadays. I'm not sure I'd want to sit on one of those things.

On my right is a high counter of transparent plastic. It has many compartments, each filled with coffee beans. A mid-twenties guy stands behind the counter. He's

wearing a pale cream sweater. A scent of perfume drifts from him. I guess it just might be aftershave.

He begins checking five large thermos flasks that occupy most of the counter. Each bears a label, 'House Decaf', 'House Special', and so on.

I order a Columbian. Seems a good idea. I need the caffeine. It was so boring in the bar across the road, I drank more than I should have.

"Anything else? Something to eat?"

"No, thanks."

The door bell rings. I turn around to look. Two guys come in, then a young woman, about twenty-three, in dark eye makeup. One of the men carries a battered Samsonite briefcase, the hardshell type.

"Hi. I'm Bob." The fellow with the briefcase sticks out his hand, so I shake it. He's about five-ten, has intense blue-green eyes, black hair and a neatly-trimmed beard.

"Uh, nice to meet you."

"Are you here for the open mike?"

"I guess so. I'm meeting one of my students here."

"I publish the Lunar Poetic Magazine."

"Really?" I have the horrible suspicion this might be one of my ex-students. He looks kind of familiar.

Bob consults his watch. "You're early. It's only half past eight."

"Well, that's what it said in the *What's On*. I picked up a copy in Barnes and Noble."

"I put that to get people to come on time. Trouble is, they all know that. Nobody arrives before nine."

"Oh. How long have you been running this?"

"The poetry nights? Ever since I moved here from Austin, a couple years now. I'm doing an MFA in poetry. Have you seen the magazine?"

"No." His enthusiasm and energy threaten to light the fires I can still recall from my freshman days. The fires that smoulder under the fire-blanket of university bureaucracy.

Bob opens the briefcase and pulls out a slim magazine. "Have you written any poetry?" He passes me the

magazine. On the cover is a cartoon of a frog smoking a bubble pipe. It reminds me of Alice in Wonderland.

“Not really.”

“Not really?” He looks set to continue grilling me, but just now the front door opens and Yolanda floats in on a cloud of expensive perfume and female pheromones.

“Oh, hi, Hugh!” Yolanda grabs my arm and plants a determined kiss on my cheek.

I imagine myself branded with an apricot lip-smacker now. Must get discreetly away to the rest room, and remove the evidence. But there is no time, Yolanda links arms with me and tows me to a nearby table.

A flood of slightly odd-looking people swarm through the door. A braless girl in a string top with blonde string hair; a very tall thin pimply guy with a toilet-brush haircut and several rings dangling from his nostrils; a guy off an old Bob Dylan vinyl album cover, complete with guitar case and black French-style beret.

The beret guy is arm-in-arm with a pretty redhead who’s wearing a T-shirt printed with a picture of a taco. She turns to say hello to the string girl, and I see that the back of her T-shirt bears a large printed slogan. It reads:

‘If God had not meant man to eat pussy, he would not have made it look so much like a taco.’

A middle-aged man sits at the next table. He wears an Afghan coat like a refugee from Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band and sports a black eyepatch. He breathes with a hoarse raspy sound, like he forgot his oxygen tank.

When everyone’s settled down a bit, Bob gets up, walks over to a reading stand, and raps on it a couple of times with a tiny wooden hammer.

“It’s nice to see so many friends here tonight. And some new faces, too.” He glances sideways at me. “Everyone’s welcome to participate. In fact we demand it!”

“Isn’t he great!” Yolanda leans over and whispers, then wiggles her tongue in my ear.

“You know him?” goosebumps have risen on my arms.

“Yes.” She giggles. “Want a Coke? Diet or regular?”

“Er, yeah. Okay. Diet.” I feel dehydrated from the drinks earlier.

While I wait for her to come back, I try to read the price tags on the plants. Wow. I don’t know who can afford this stuff.

More people arrive. The room’s filling up. Ah. Here’s Yolanda with two tall glasses of ice and cola. She sets them down on the table. It takes me about ten seconds to finish mine. I like the bitter taste.

A huge spray of foliage, ferns and such, overhangs our table. At first this seemed cosy but now I see its drawbacks as a large bug drops gently off the flora and lands on Yolanda’s bare shoulder. It’s a beetle, of such a blackness that it shines deep green, a vibrating olive color.

This is what I notice but have no more time to remark when, her mouth in the same ‘O’ as that Munch painting, ‘The Scream’, Yolanda turns her head, spies the beetle, tickling its way across her cream-tan skin, raises her hand to swat it, and lets go a scream fit to shatter windows.

The beetle, probably stunned, sprouts a pair of wings and buzzes loudly away in a series of Immelman turns.

I wish I could too.

While my thoughts still churn like a washing machine, Yolanda flicks her fingers across her shoulder as if dismissing the beetle. “Ugh! You see the color of that, Hugh?”

“Did you see ... ” I begin to correct her, automatically, the English professor part of my brain taking command in the lack of a more appropriate captain.

“I’ve brought some poetry. You think they’ll like?” She shivers for a moment, and her breasts jiggle enticingly. She has these pert breasts, my personal addiction, these being so high they seem to start at her collar bones. It’s been very hot today, which explains her low-

cut batik silk blouse. It's rather translucent. I don't think she's wearing anything underneath.

"Ah ... Er ... " Her term paper's egregious grammar swims in my mind's eye. More pocho than English in some places. "Not sure." Shit, what can I say? Then, momentarily the spin cycle stops and I think: yeah. I'll justify my grade with her poetry. It's English, more or less.

"Tell you what. I'll grade you on your poetry. It is in English, isn't it?"

"Oh, si! Of course!" without warning she leans toward me and plants a kiss on my lips.

Something stirs down below. Damn. I nonchalantly cross my legs and think of beetles, plants, and ... Yolanda's shoulder. This isn't working but at least my condition hasn't, um, increased.

The screech of an amplifier in feedback splits the air for a moment, then Bob's voice echoes around the room. "Hi everybody! Glad you could come. Next week, try to remember we start at eight thirty, right? Let's see. Who's got the list?" he looks around.

A lanky student-type gets up and walks over to Bob, and hands over a piece of paper. Bob studies it for a moment. "Who?"

The student points across the room to a man in his late forties, mainly bald, with glasses.

"Clyde?" he says into the microphone.

The forty-something guy walks over to the microphone. He is clutching a sheaf of letter-sized paper. "Near enough," he says. "Nobody in America can spell my name right, but it doesn't matter. Is it one poem?"

"Yeah, one poem each," Bob says.

I hear a buzzing of wings nearby. The beetle emerges from one of the flower sprays and circles at high speed under one of the ceiling lamps.

The middle-aged guy taps the microphone, clears his throat, and picks up his sheaf of papers.

"This is a poem called 'She'."

Oh shit, this is going to be some maudlin gump

about his significant other, I expect. And of all things he speaks with a Brit accent. Weird.

He clears his throat again then bursts out with:

“When I first saw you on the floodlit catwalk, I felt passion stir and had to be in your warm leather embrace.

“While I was so in love, I could not see your faults. Proclaiming only virtues I allowed photographs, videos even, to be taken, which show a grinning fool: I, with you, then.”

Hmm, I think, this may not be quite as I expected.

“The money I spent: your black vinyl bra, body waxing, silicone enhancements, rubber gear – o God all that stuff.” He pauses for breath.

Finally he finishes, and rushes away from the mike as if embarrassed to have read the poem, and hides behind a huge potted fern.

Bob walks up to the mike again. He smiles happily at Yolanda, rolls his somewhat bloodshot brown eyes, and says, “and next, a new member – ”

Yolanda grabs hold of my arm and digs her nails in like a cat my mom once had. I’m afraid to move.

“– Yolanda, will read her poem, “Him.”

Yolanda releases my arm. She gives me a sweet peck on the cheek, then advances to the microphone. The overhead spotlight – I guess it’s there to help read – finds her batik blouse little impediment. Oh Buddha, she’s magnificent.

From behind the giant fern the ‘She’ guy says quietly, “by George!”

Yolanda caresses the microphone, pulls it from its stand, and, in her Latina, breathy, husky, sexy voice, says:

“Him. So smart. So shy.

“Him. Not to know. But now ...”

I hope no-one is recording this for posterity. I will have a hard time justifying a B plus for this. Meanwhile Yolanda has turned to face me rather than the audience, and continues,

“to want him body...” but now the words are coming and going in waves. And I don’t want to hear the fragments I can make out. It’s all too embarrassing.

“until he is mine, mine, mine.” Yolanda blows me a kiss and folds the paper.

A few people clap in a desultory way. The guys around the room glance at Yolanda’s silhouette in disbelief, then at me, with envy.

Yolanda comes back and sits down. After a moment she rests her hand casually on my thigh.

“I’m going for a coffee. Would you like some?” I croak.

She shakes her head, smiles, and digs her fingertips in for a moment. I feel a bit drunk, but not so drunk that she doesn’t cause an immediate reaction.

I get to my feet and stroll into the espresso bar for a strong one. Maybe caffeine will revive me. I better get a cab back to my apartment. Don’t want a DWI on my licence.

The pale-cream sweater guy is face to face with a Latino man about twenty-five years old. I catch the last words of what he’s saying:

“ – light, man.”

“Well, that’s Medellin for ya. Adios, man.” The Latino guy turns and walks to the door. He seems to be missing an ear.

“Can I get you something?” sweater guy asks.

“Espresso?”

“Sure.”

“You all right? You look a bit red. Too hot?”

“I’m fine,” I grunt, trying futilely to banish Yolanda from my imagination. I feel dizzy.

The door swings open. Yolanda walks through, takes me by the arm, and says, “Come on, Hugh. No time for coffee. I think you need some air.”