

ESTHER FRIESNER

WHY I WANT TO COME TO BREWER COLLEGE

NOBLE SIRs OF THE BREWER College Office of Admissions, permit this humble person to introduce oneself. My name, for this purpose, shall be Fred Schenectady, for I have heard it told once, at a lecture on this very campus by a notable author of fabulous tales, that a thing is called Fred because we have to call it something and that writers get their ideas from Schenectady because they have to get them from somewhere.

This sums up my situation, for in truth I am something from somewhere. Indeed, since coming to these shores I have found that upon first encounter I am often greeted with: "What in hell are you and where the devil did you come from?" Those who do not make these somewhat profane exclamations are few and far between, but I am proud to say that they have included your own august President of the College, Mr. Ferragus Franklin, and his lissome and beauteous underling, the Dean of the College, Miss Cecilia Hansen. How far under President Franklin one may generally find Dean Hansen is, according to faculty gossip, a matter of record closely linked to those times when the honorable Mrs. Franklin is out of town or ginned to the gills.

I disapprove of such gossip, for I find it low and insulting, particularly to those of us who, like my unworthy self, have gills.

Pray do not imagine that I make mention of this physical attribute in an attempt to procure special favor regarding my application for admission to your esteemed institute of higher learning. I admit that my appearance is singular when compared to that of the majority of your student body, but I assure you that I am in no way remarkable among those of my own kind. True, my skin is of a more luminous green than many of my breed, and the turtle shell which conceals the softer portions of my anatomy retains a high gloss in spite of the long hours I spend immersed in the great pond which abuts the Brewer College croquet fields, but such observations are the stuff of vanity. I will mention them no more. As for that saucer-shaped depression upon the crown of my head in which I bear a modest portion of life-giving water whenever I venture forth onto the land, it is of neither greater nor lesser size than the average among my people.

By now I fear that you may have grown impatient with me, for I have dallied somewhat beside the point of the required Office of Admissions essay, namely: Tell us in your own words about a life-changing episode from your past and explain how this relates to your desire to attend Brewer College. If I have delayed reaching the meat of this essay, I ask your pardon. I do not eat meat, though blood is another matter, and the heartsblood of this exercise cannot flow properly without some explanatory preamble. Surely none of the worthy applicants for admission to this venerable institution has ever willfully deceived your perspicacious minds by exaggeration, distortion, or other forms of falsification! I refuse to be the first.

So, the meat:

If memory serves me, my life has been neither especially long nor eventful. I am not old as my kin reckon age, having first seen the watery light of day from beneath the surface of a small river near Kyoto, during the first days of the Tokugawa Shogunate. By your Western calendars this would be sometime in the early seventeenth century.

My formative decades were unremarkable, filled with the usual round of seasons, festivals, and opportunities for luring unwary travelers and livestock into the river so that I might pull them beneath the waters and drain them of blood at my leisure. Blood was not my only means of sustenance. Like most of my clan, I developed a taste for wild cucumbers. Wise men who sought passage across my river always came prepared with an offering of these succulent vegetables wherewith to purchase my indulgence and a safe conduct. (Indeed, in my native land men call us by the same word which they apply to

the cucumber, namely kappa.) So the years flowed on.

One morning, in the season when the cherry blossoms flower, there came to the banks of my river a maiden of remarkable beauty. At first sight of her loveliness I was enraptured, so much so that I would call this incident the first life-changing episode of my days. The stunning effect her presence had on me was redoubled by the fact that while her fine complexion and elegant garb implied aristocratic birth, she came alone to cross my river. There was a little wooden footbridge at that particular ford, as sturdy as I could build it, to tempt travelers, and as low as I could build it, to make it all the easier for me to surge out of the water and seize them.

It was not the custom for highborn maidens to travel unescorted, with or without the availability of sturdy footbridges. Thus her arrival caused me grave wonder. If my kindred have one overwhelming fault, it is curiosity. Rather than bide beneath the surface, I emerged at once and revealed myself to the maiden. More, I left the sanctuary of my river and came out onto the dry land in order to accost her. To my surprise, she did not recoil in horror or dismay, merely regarded me with a level, confident gaze. Then she bowed. Now to bow to a kappa is a ruse so ancient and common that all of us are well aware of it, save only the newest hatchlings. A person who makes such reverence to a kappa does not do so out of courtesy, but to beguile us into returning the obeisance, for when we bow, we perforce spill the water that we carry in the small depression atop our heads. That done, we are helpless and in peril of our lives.

I knew this. It was knowledge vouchsafed me by my mother with my first mouthful of oxblood. But love fills the world with fools, and I was so besotted by the maiden's dazzling beauty that...I bowed back.

How can I describe what followed? The water obeyed the Law of Gravity, and I followed suit soon after, falling nigh-lifeless to the ground. (Noble Sirs, I would have to drain you of more than half of your own precious bodily fluids for you to comprehend fully what I endured when my water spilled. I will perform this service for you, if you like, provided that it will not adversely impact my chances for admission. Brewer College is justly famed for its rigid refusal to look too far beyond a poor showing on the SATs, and I admit that algebra is not my friend.)

As I lay there, gazing up into the branches of the ancient pine tree that overhung my river, I awaited the death blow, for surely the maiden would destroy me now that I was helpless at her feet. To my surprise, this did not happen. Rather I felt myself being lifted up tenderly and submersed once more in the healing river. Full awareness returned and I leapt up to confront the merciful one who was both my doom and my salvation.

"Lady, why have you spared me when you might have so easily compassed my death?" I cried.

"Why would I want you dead?" she asked.

I spoke frankly: "Because I am a kappa, and as such a monster in the eyes of your people."

She shook her head prettily. "What nonsense! There are no monsters, except in the tales of long ago. Your appearance clearly is not human, but I cannot see how someone as small as you could ever be a threat, let alone a monster."

I longed to correct her misapprehension. "It is true that we kappa are small of stature," I told her. "A vial of poison is smaller, yet has the power to destroy a legion of samurai. Our littleness conceals abnormal strength. Thus do we manage to drag our prey beneath the waves and then --"

Ah, how could I tell her the exact manner in which we remove the blood from our victims? She was plainly of gentle descent, and this aspect of a kappa's life is -- forgive me -- unspeakably crude and unfit for a lady's ears. My kind are unable to blush, being poikilothermic (I modestly call the attention of the learned gentlemen of the Admissions Office to my marks in the Biology achievement examinations, for which no algebra was required) else I would have done so.

All I could do was conclude thus: "I humbly beg that you accept my word on

this matter, lest in some future journey you encounter another of my kind who may not grant you the upper hand. I owe you my life. I would sacrifice it sooner than see you risk losing yours through ignorance."

It was the wrong word to use. The maiden's eyes flashed lightning and her entire aspect darkened. "Ignorance?" she exclaimed. "Do you dare to accuse me of so grave a sin? I am to be the first princess of my house to depart these blessed lands and travel to America for my education! My glorious royal kinsman, the Emperor, would never dream of entrusting so much to an ignorant girl, lest that failing cause myself, my family, the Imperial house and all Nippon to lose face in the West. Do you deem yourself more perspicacious than our Emperor?"

Naturally I did not, and it was only a last-minute flash of wisdom that prevented me from prostrating myself-- and spilling my water once more -- to protest my devotion to our gracious Sovereign. A being may drink the blood of his fellow countrymen and still be a patriot.

"Exalted Lady," I said, "I did not know you were a princess. Pardon my foolishness and accept me into your service, now and forever. Only thus may I hope to repay your kindness and expunge my blunder."

Again she shook her head. "Let there be no more talk of service. The days of feudalism are over and done with, the era of progress and independent thought is at hand." She bestowed upon me a smile that rivaled the brilliance of Amaterasu, the ever-living sun-goddess, and added: "You above all must be thankful that we do not still live in those benighted times, for then I would never have come to this sweet river save in the company of many guards and servants. They might have treated you far differently than I."

"All the more reason for you to accept me into your service, Princess!" I argued. "The debt of gratitude which I owe you - -"

She did not permit me to finish, saying instead: "You owe me nothing. Go, and live happily." With that she crossed the bridge and was soon lost to sight among the pine trees on the far bank.

Live happily. Those were her words. Even after so long, I still remember them. But how could I live happily, save in her presence? She had refused my service, yet I refused to accept her refusal. Obedience is our flesh, but honor is our blood, and flesh without blood is weak and useless and unpalatable. On that day I took an oath to follow my princess, even unto the land she called America.

I will not trouble you with the hazards of my journey. Do not be amazed nor disbelieve me when I tell you that I was able to shadow her path here, to the campus of Brewer College, as easily as a dog may track a rabbit. We kappa read all waters as scholars read the secrets of ancient scrolls. My river took me to the sea, the sea to another river, and so on via streams both aboveground and below until I followed the final source into the pond which your descriptive brochures call Stillwater Lake. At last I was near my princess once more!

My princess attended your fine school completely unaware of my presence. I had determined to be her secret guardian, silent and unseen as any ninja. If she ever needed my protection, I would be ready.

She never needed me. Not once in all the years of her tuition did she ever find herself in a situation which my intervention might have improved. At first I rejoiced to know that she was safe and happy. This gladness lasted about a year and a half. Then, to my shame, I grew bored with so uneventful a life and began to seek some manner of solace for the tedium of my days.

If you wonder how I nourished myself during my princess's course of studies at Brewer College (or the Marcus Brewer Academic Institution for the Tutelage and Edification of Refined Young Gentlewomen, as it was then called) it is no less than I expected of you. You are compassionate gentlemen, for the Brewer College Office of Admissions must be as compassionate as it is noble, eminent, munificent, and unsusceptible to flattery. No doubt you realize that Stillwater Lake in no way resembles a busy river ford and offers my kind no opportunity to waylay travelers. Perhaps it is the ever-present layer of

verdant slime that obscures the surface which preserves its solitude, perhaps the smell of rotting vegetation which keeps most folk at a distance. Your concern is touching but needless: In the days when my princess attended Brewer, the only creatures on campus more numerous than squirrels were transient Yale underclassmen much flown with wine. Both were lackwit enough to venture near my lair, both were equally tasty, and both were plentiful. The diminution in their numbers was barely remarked, except when it was applauded. To return to my history, I grew bored with waiting in the pond and took to leaving it for hours at a time. At first my wanderings were purely sylvan, for the Brewer College campus boasts many lovely natural prospects. (I have attached a collection of haiku which I composed in those days, if you would deign to honor me by reading them.)

Soon, however, I found my attention drawn to the open windows of classrooms, and the pleasant drone of your faculty members presenting this or that lecture for the edification of the young gentlewomen.

Noble Sirs, can you imagine what it is like for a being who has spent all his life in water to discover thirst? I mean no thirst such as any liquid may slake, but the thirst for knowledge, for education, for wisdom and for that self-betterment which must accompany all. I blush (in the figurative sense alone) to recount that often, when I crouched beneath the classroom windows, I wholly forgot about my princess. Worse, by the time she had completed her course of study at Brewer College and returned to our mutual homeland, I had become so enamored of my furtive academic pursuits that I did not notice her absence until classes reconvened the following autumn.

Having proved myself so lax in a matter of honor, I could not for very shame go home. So I told myself, yet the truth of things was that I did not want to return. The princess's beauty had touched my heart, but the beauty of learning touched my soul. I continued to attend classes surreptitiously and to steal into the library via the bathroom drains so that I might pursue independent studies. In this manner I stayed on at Brewer College through what remained of your twentieth century. I witnessed a thousand triumphs, a thousand follies. Most certainly I was there when the college decided to admit gentlemen to the student body, although in those first years it was a trifle difficult to find any notable distinction of appearance or comportment between them and the young ladies.

I now reach the proper time to relate my second and more crucial life-changing experience:

It took place during those days which I had come to think of as The Desolation, for the end of spring invariably marked the graduation of most of that year's senior class and the departure of the rest of the student body. There were no more classes given, no lectures upon which I might spy, and the library always underwent so thorough a post-academic-year cleaning that I dared not sneak in, lest I endure a violent allergic reaction to the amount of chlorine bleach poured down the drains. Summer itself might bring special education courses or other intellectual enticements to the campus, but until then I suffered as a drunkard suffers who has been deprived of wine.

This brings me to President Franklin and Dean Hansen. Assuredly you are well acquainted with them, Noble Sirs. Thus you know that I do not exaggerate when I say that they are both of that physical type which might have led the honorable Mr. Charles Darwin to conclude that human beings evolved from eels, or perhaps stringbeans. It is one of the divine mysteries of this world how two people so lacking in substance were able to fill the evening air with cries of lust loud enough to rouse me from my solitary brooding beneath the pond. I have overheard members of the faculty compare such ungoverned amorousness to the actions of crazed weasels. I disagree. Weasels are vigorous but much more discreet when rutting, as a rule. (I humbly request you to peruse my study, herewith attached, *Mating Vocalizations of Academic Administrators and Genus Mustela: A Comparative Study*, currently under review at the illustrious and prestigious *Journal of Mammalogy*.)

Had the President and the Dean of Brewer College wallowed in their mutual

attraction at any other time. I might have done nothing. But I was in the grasp of that bleak despair engendered by the end of classes and so threw my own sense of discretion to the four winds. I was sorrowful, and irritable, and hungry, and so I rushed from the waters of the pond in a foul temper and seized hold of the nearest thing that looked at all edible.

This proved to be President Franklin.

I will not trouble you with a full account of our struggle. You may surmise that President Franklin screamed and kicked, and that Dean Hansen shrieked and shook, and that when she called out an offer to fetch Campus Security he stridently refused it on the grounds that he found death by drowning infinitely preferable to Mrs. Franklin making inquiries as to why he had been loitering beside Stillwater Lake unclothed in the first place. These were his last words before I got his face under water.

Up until that moment I had merely made my capture. When I had his head nicely immersed in the pond, I shifted my attention to making my kill.

As widely educated and erudite as you kind Gentlemen of the Admissions Board must be, I doubt that you have ever heard how loudly a kappa's victim gives tongue when first we set teeth to flesh. Permit me a moment of whimsy (provided that it does not harm my chances for admission) but it is the site rather than the bite which is so traumatic to our prey. Unlike your Western vampires, we do not take our sanguine nourishment from the neck. We are humble, and set our sights lower.

Much lower.

As one of our ancient philosophers once said, we are not merely humble but efficient. Why dig a hole for a new well from which to slake your thirst if you find a perfectly good one already awaiting you? I hope you catch my drift, for to be more specific would be unseemly, vulgar, and more suitable to an application for Harvard.

President Franklin is not brawny, but can exhibit unprecedented bursts of strength. I had barely taken my first sip of his blood when he erupted from beneath me like a breaching whale and flung himself desperately toward the bank. Dean Hansen had by this time somewhat recovered her self-possession and waded into the shallows to assist him. She clutched me firmly with both hands and, while her lover pulled forward, she dug in her heels and held back. My suction-hold on President Franklin was strong, but not equal to such a strain. It broke with a popping sound that was all but drowned out by my would-be victim's scream. President Franklin collapsed face-first onto the shore while Dean Hansen and I tumbled backward into the water.

I regained my footing in the pond just in time to see President Franklin sprinting away into the darkness and was immediately inspired to compose a haiku upon the image of the setting moon. Unfortunately, this delicate verse was blown from my head like a plum blossom by the gale of profanity blasting from the lips of the divine Dean Hansen.

"Will you look at that son-of-a-bitch run?" she declaimed. (Noble Sirs, I know you will excuse the inclusion of expletives in my unworthy application. I merely transcribe the words of another, for the sake of accuracy. I have dwelled among Americans long enough to learn that you value truth above good manners.) "He didn't so much as wait two seconds to see if maybe I could use some help! Not even one goddam second to say 'Thank you for getting this giant leech off my butt,' the skanky, pencil-dicked bastard!"

She proceeded in this vein for some time. Ah, Noble Sirs, what a refutation of Keats was there! Beauty is Truth, but Dean Hansen's harsh judgment against President Franklin effectively negated all possibility of Truth being Beauty. When at last she paused for breath it was to behold me regarding her with deep and abiding awe.

"What are you staring at?" she demanded of me. Here was even greater cause for astonishment on my part, for I am, as I have already described myself to you, of a unique aspect vis-à-vis human beings. For the second time in my life, I found myself confronting a person who did not flee in terror at the sight of me. Fascinated, I took a step toward her.

Dean Hansen misinterpreted my approach as that of a hostile predator. Naked as she was, she dived for her purse, discarded with the rest of her clothing upon the shore, and pulled out a small, cylindrical object which she unwrapped instantly, revealing its snowy inner purity. Whatever it was, she regarded it as a talisman of great power, for she declaimed: "Stay back or this goes right into that pothole full of pond water on your head! I'm warning you, it's super-absorbent; it sucks up faster than Fergie on one of his alumni fund-raising sprees."

I drew back, startled by the lady's belligerence but more so by her obvious knowledge. She recognized me! She knew me for what I was and knew also how to defeat me! What wonder was this?

"Oh, stop gawking," Dean Hansen said. "I used to teach Asian Studies. I know you're a kappa. What I'd like to know is why in hell you're hanging around this dump?"

Her erudition impressed me almost to the point of inspiring a reverent bow, but I caught myself just in time. Humbly I replied, "Honored Lady, my original purpose for being here has long since passed away. Now I remain within the precincts of this beloved institution solely for the love of learning." I proceeded to render her in full the same account of my life which I have presented to you, Noble Sirs, during the course of which she used President Franklin's clothing wherewith to dry herself before redonning her own.

When I was done, Dean Hansen's fair face assumed a thoughtful look. "All those years and we never knew," she said softly, as though speaking for herself alone. "The stories about all those missing Yalies...." She cut short her musings and made a small sound of disgust. "Bah! I've got bigger problems. What am I going to do with you? Sell you to the Enquirer? God knows we could use the money."

"Brewer College is in financial difficulty?" I asked.

"In hock up to the eyeballs. We used to be something, a real bastion of higher learning. Now we're a name. Oh sure, you can trade on a name-brand college, lure in the status-hungry rubes, make the parents think they're getting the whole teatime-white-gloves-polo-ponies crap that went out with the fifties, but it doesn't last forever. Not unless you're Princeton. And the real cash cows are the alumni, not the tuition-paying chumps. What's four years of income compared to a lifetime?"

Her words were harsh, but her eyes were soft with a deep grief. Dean Hansen's love for Brewer College is sincere, as is mine, and her unspoken sorrow shattered my heart.

"What have I done?" I cried with utmost remorse. "All these years I have enjoyed a Brewer education yet never once have I made the smallest effort to repay this wondrous place, to secure its future! Oh, I am truly the leech that you paint me! I cannot live with this knowledge." So saying, I snatched the cottony talisman from Dean Hansen's hand and immersed it smartly into the water atop my head. Its powers of absorbency were as promised: It swiftly sopped up that sustaining moisture to the last drop whereupon I collapsed, gasping.

Yes, Noble Sirs, what you must surmise is true: I sought to die. I acted with deliberation and resolve, desiring that death expunge dishonor. If I am now alive to write this, my unworthy petition, it is solely thanks to the benevolence of your Dean Hansen.

I confess that her kindness was of a different style than that of my long-departed princess. Picking me up roughly by the neck and tail apertures of my shell, she treated me in the manner of a fire bucket, scooping me face first through the waters of the pond, then setting me down on the bank with a mighty thump once she had thus refilled my cranial indentation.

"Don't you ever do anything that stupid again!" she commanded. "That was my last tam -- Oh, never mind. Look, if you honestly believe you've cheated Brewer by bootlegging lessons, then all I've got to say is killing yourself is one hell of a lousy way to settle up."

I was deeply abashed by this insightful reprimand and said, "Honored Lady, how

can I then repay the college? I have no money, or else I would gladly provide you with tuition for all the years of learning I have stolen. My only means of personal support is --"

She raised one hand to silence me. "I know how you sustain yourself," she said. "And with all due respect, it's an image I'd rather not invite home to Mama. Okay, so you got a Brewer College education for free, but it took you the better part of a century to do it. That's almost like being a Comp. Lit. graduate student, which was Fergie's calling before he married the Dragon Lady and fell into this little plum pie. Now he's a glorified telephone solicitor, shaking down the alums when he isn't sucking ...up...to...."

Her words trailed off, her anger waned, her glance fell upon me. The fire in her eyes faded, to be replaced by a thoughtful expression. "Little kappa," she said, "how would you like to do something really useful for Brewer College?" Thus, Noble Sirs, does my humble application for admission come before you, backed by the patronage of your own exalted Dean, Miss Cecilia Hansen. In this she has the full support of President Franklin, with whom I have made my peace and whom she has brought to see the advantage of having me as a Brewer student. They might have used their combined power to effect my matriculation without your instrumentality, but I refused, even though their intervention most effectively would have obliterated certain unhappy lacunae in my academic record, such as my lack of a high school diploma. If I am to gain entry to this fine academy, it must be done through the proper channels, on my own merit.

Yet I must become a student of Brewer College, Noble Sirs. I must, although I doubt there is anything left in your curriculum which I have not apprehended already, over the years. (As many of your students and their parents know, it is not the actual scholarship one acquires at college that counts for half so much as the diploma one receives. Wise men abound who have devoted their lives to self-education, but the common people still stand awestruck when an otherwise cloddish witling declares before them, "I went to Yale.") I must, I say, because only one who has successfully completed your course of study and been awarded an official degree may legitimately call himself a Brewer College alumnus.

Only an alumnus may become an alumni representative.

Only an alumni representative may solicit funds for the furtherance of Brewer College from his fellow alumni.

Only the most successful alumni representatives know how to get the largest donations from their prey, which Dean Hansen refers to as the fine art of getting blood from a stone.

I know this art well, though it is from softer sources that I am accustomed to extracting blood. But I am open-minded, and adaptable, and I believe that given five minutes alone with any of your wealthier alumni I could call forth from them hitherto unheard-of generosity, given the alternative I would offer: Brewer graduates, Open your checkbooks or die. Such a simple choice! And that is why I want to come to Brewer College.