

A SMALL SKIRMISH IN THE CULTURE WAR

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Roger hated Elwood Tweed. There was no denying R it anymore. It had taken Roger several months to put a precise name to the churning in his gut whenever he entered Tweed's presence. When he had first come to work for the Understanding Network, he was certain that what he was feeling was awe. Here he was, a twenty-two-year-old English major fresh out of Gates College, working in television as personal assistant to Elwood Tweed, Ph.D., on-air book critic for 24/7 and host of *The Good Word*.

But awe had changed to anxiety when it became apparent that everything Roger Allman did for Elwood Tweed was wrong. He put too much cream in Tweed's coffee. He failed to highlight a stray mention of Tweed's name in the two dozen newsfeeds he surveyed each day for the great man. He gave Tweed his five-minutes-to-air call at four minutes and forty-three seconds, or five minutes and seven. By the fall Roger had convinced himself that it was jealousy that was eating at him. Tweed was not all that smart—his degrees to the contrary—and Roger had come to realize that his most firmly held convictions were at best wrongheaded and at worst pernicious. Tweed was nothing but a smile that had about twelve too many teeth, a buttery voice, and an unflagging self-confidence that was within hailing distance of arrogance.

But Roger had now proceeded far beyond mere jealousy. He daydreamed of Tweed being caught in bed with a goat. A male goat. Or pitching headlong down a flight of stairs. Preferably made of marble.

Roger thought about quitting his job every day. But he could imagine how it would look on his resume if he had lasted less than six months on his first job. People would think he wasn't serious about having a career in television. And despite his utter disenchantment with Elwood Tweed, Roger knew that there was no higher calling, that movies and nightclubs could appeal to the lowest common denominator, but television's purpose was to uplift and educate, to bring serious culture to the masses.

"I'm sorry, Kurt," Tweed touched Kurt Vonnegut's sleeve discreetly. "But we have to pause here for a word from our sponsors. But when we return, I want you to hear what you think of those who call your work—pardon the term—sci-fi."

"Rascals." Vonnegut yawned. "Critics."

"We'll be right back, ladies and gentlemen." Tweed turned his smile up to broil, and the directorbot cut to a commercial for *Steak Pearls, The First Foodtabs With That Home-Cooked Taste*.

"One minute, Mr. Tweed." Roger never understood why Tweed insisted on a count during commercials. "Can I get anyone anything?"

"Yes," ordered Tweed. "Bring Mr. Vonnegut more water. His glass is almost empty."

Actually, Vonnegut had taken just one sip during the opening segment. In Roger's opinion, he would be better off drinking an extra-large latte with a couple of extra shots of espresso. (He looked as though he might nod off at any minute.) But then most of the guests who appeared on *The Good Word* recently tended to sleepwalk through their interviews. In August, the Understanding Network had switched Tweed's slot from the early bird 5:00 to 5:15 AM to the late night 12:45 to 1 AM. Tweed continued to insist that the show remain live—"After all, this is television," he intoned, "and as my pal Ed Murrow likes to say, we must never take the easy way out"—which was too bad for Vonnegut, who looked at 12:50 AM like he was eighty-four going on a hundred and twenty.

"Thirty seconds, Mr. Tweed."

“Make yourself useful for a change, Allman.” Tweed twisted around in his chair. “I left my readette of *Cat’s Cradle* in my dressing room. Fetch it up here for me. You will thumbprint it for me, Kurt?”

“That book is not science fiction,” Kurt Vonnegut muttered. “I don’t write science fiction.”

Roger was happy to get away from the set and (especially) from Tweed. He settled himself in a Pneum-A-Pod and was whooshed down to the eighteenth floor of the Understanding tower. This was where the talent for 24/7, the UN’s morning news, talk, and political science show, had their offices. Sharon Swelter and Bobo Lamonica were just down the hall. Tweed had argued his way down onto eighteen even though the directorbots only gave him three or four Book Banter segments a week. But on eighteen he could bump into the stars of 24/7 and pretend he was one of them. The actual headquarters of *The Good Word* were way up on sixty-four, which was where Roger spend most of his time when he wasn’t running Tweed’s errands.

The carpetmoss on the floor of Tweed’s office gave off an earthy deep woods scent that Tweed liked to tell people reminded him of Thoreau’s *Walden*, although Roger was pretty sure that Tweed had never been north of Yonkers. Tweed’s rosewood desk was slightly bigger than the cubby where Roger worked. The walls were decorated with holos of the host in the reluctant embrace of some of his most famous guests: Judy Blume, Gore Vidal, Joyce Carol Oates, and James Michener. There were two of Tweed with J.D. Salinger, who had become something of a publicity hound since the release of the videogame version of *House of Glass*.

Tweed’s desk and credenza were piled high with gaudy readettes, most of them still unread in shrink-wrap. Roger sorted through them, searching for *Cat’s Cradle*. Every now and then he would find one he was certain Tweed wouldn’t miss, like the latest Ursula Le Guin historical, or the sequel to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As he looked, he tried not to listen to the desktop, on which played the live feed from the studio up on the ninety-fourth floor. Tweed was browbeating a weary Vonnegut.

“. . . fantasy, romance, thrillers—sheer vulgarity, in my opinion, and I’m not ashamed to say it. Don’t you agree, Kurt, that the people who control our publishing houses ought to be ashamed of the way they have dragged American letters into the gutter, have foisted popular hacks like Kelly and Resnick, Kessel and Malzberg off on them while publishing only two Pynchon books in the past decade? Don’t they have the responsibility, nay, the obligation to publish works of fiction that ennoble us?”

Vonnegut squinted suspiciously into the studio lights. “All my aliens are metpahors.”

“Obviously, Kurt. I quite agree. But does it bother you that an innocent reader, say some bright thirteen-year-old boy, might mistake your work for sci-fi?”

“Doris Lessing.” Vonnegut picked up his water glass, considered it and intoned, “Margaret Atwood.” He sipped.

“Rog, what are you doing here?”

As Roger spun around, he knocked over a stack of readettes haphazardly piled on top of Tweed’s brushed titanium IBM File-O-Matic. He managed to snag three in midair, but the rest clattered to the floor. One of those in his grasp was *Cat’s Cradle*.

“Your clueless boss is live, Bookboy.” Doreen Best grinned at him from the doorway. “Shouldn’t you be up in the studio getting ready to wipe his nose?”

Doreen Best flustered Roger in just about every way possible for a woman to fluster a man. It started with her looks. While not exactly beautiful, she was inarguably striking. Doreen was taller than Robert by

a head. She had a dancer's long body; when she was eighteen she'd appeared in the chorus lines of Stephen Sondheim's *The Cherry Orchard* and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Treasure Island*. Some people might have said that her neck was too long or her nose was too stubby, but Roger was not one of them. He usually tried not to look directly at her, because every glimpse seemed to sear itself into his memory and return to haunt him at odd moments, especially just as he was trying to fall asleep.

Then there was the fact that Doreen had been working for the Understanding Channel for almost seven years, which always made him feel like the total neophyte that he was. At various times she'd been on the production staffs of shows like *24/7*, *Protons and Planets*, *Pan Am Broadway Showcase*, *Yesterday Today*, *Poet's Theater*, *March of Progress*, and *Impact!*, and had even spent a few months working with Edward R. Murrow, whom the network had lured away from CBS with the promise of a weekly fifteen minutes of prime-time for *It's Bad For You*, his anti-smoking show. And, more than anything else, her attitude toward television in general and the Understanding Network in particular flustered him. Sometimes she seemed too cynical about TV's momentous enterprise, which Roger believed—no, knew—nothing less than the cultivation of the human spirit. And when it came to the day-to-day of the UN, she was usually more interested in office gossip than the quality of the programming.

But what flustered Roger most about the glamorous Doreen Best was that she seemed to be taking an interest in him.

Now she crossed the carpet moss to where he stood goggling at her and gently tapped his chin, encouraging him to shut his open mouth.

"Let me try again, Bookboy, this time in English." She pressed a finger into his chest. "You are here."

His heart leapt to his throat.

She pointed toward the ceiling. "Tweed is there."

He swallowed it again.

She folded her arms over her chest. "Why is that?"

"He's not clueless," Roger mumbled, and stabbed at the mute button on Tweed's desktop. It made him uncomfortable whenever Doreen mocked his boss, even if he agreed with every brickbat she hurled at Tweed. Tweed may have been an inconsiderate ass-hole, but he was doing the most important work a man could do, bringing civilization to the great unwashed of Florida and Ohio and Montana.

"He just doesn't always think things through," said Roger at last.

"Are you stealing his stuff again?" She stopped to pick up one of the readettes and glanced at it. "Oh, you better leave *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* if you know what's good for you." She tossed it carelessly onto the File-O-Matic and lowered her voice into an uncanny imitation of Tweed. "A classic bildungsroman in the tradition of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*."

"Don't, Doreen," he said uncomfortably. "I shouldn't be listening to this."

"Then come out with me tonight," she said. "I have something I want you to see."

"It's tomorrow morning, actually." He checked the clock that hung over the doorway. "Twelve fifty-eight." He gathered the rest of the fallen readettes. "I need to get back to the studio before they sign off."

“But after you finish helping Tweed pat himself on the back, your time is your own, right?”

“What is it that you want from me, Doreen?”

She sat down in Tweed’s chair, kicked off her shoes, and put her feet up on his desk. “I was hoping for your immortal soul, but I’d settle for a slice of innocence.”

Roger concentrated fiercely on her stockinged toes, afraid that his gaze might slide up her calves and perhaps stray past her knees. “What would you do with it?”

“I’ll think of something,” she replied with a leer.

“Put your shoes on, Doreen. This is an office, not your living room.”

“You know what your problem is, Bookboy? You’re too serious.” She slipped one shoe on, then the other. “But maybe that’s why I bother with you.”

“And why do I bother with you?”

She scribbled something on a sheet of Tweed’s note-paper, folded it, and tucked it into Roger’s shirt pocket. The touch of her fingertips through the thin material made his neck muscles go tight. “Meet me at the Pneum-A-Pod on forty-eight,” she said, as she walked past him. “Twenty minutes.” She paused at the door. “Bring your sense of humor. You do have one, don’t you?”

“Of course I have one,” he said heatedly.

“I was starting to wonder. Dust it off once in a while.”

“We’re in a deadly serious business, uplifting the public.”

“Deadly, right.” She waved over her shoulder on her way out.

He waited almost a minute before he opened the note.

You don’t have a choice, it read.

Roger and Doreen lay side by side in the Pneum-A-Pod as it hurtled on a cushion of air through the Eighth Avenue tunnel. Through the clear walls of the tunnel, Roger might have seen the lights of the city rushing beneath them, if he hadn’t been staring into Doreen’s eyes.

“What I believe is that ratings reflect our mission,” he was saying. “According to the May sweeps, the UN has more viewers than Fox and CBS combined. And if the World Chess Championship hadn’t gone to fourteen games, A&E wouldn’t even have come close to us.”

“The only reason so many people watch us is that there isn’t anything on TV that’s more fun,” Doreen responded. “Uncle Ralph makes sure of that.”

“Uncle Ralph? Are you talking about Ralph Nader?”

“Right—the Secretary of Television,” she confirmed. “The man who knows what’s good for you—or else.”

“Are you seriously suggesting that the Pan Am Broadway Showcase isn’t fun? Don’t we run Shakespeare and Aristophanes every week? Didn’t we just have a Molière Festival?”

She made a lemon face. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

She had never quoted Shakespeare to him before. Roger tried not to let her see that he was impressed. “But where are we going?”

“You’ve been cooped up in the Tower for too long, Bookboy,” she said with a smile he didn’t quite understand. “Wake up and smell the gutter.”

“I’ve never been in this part of town before.” Roger glanced uneasily at the garish lights that blinked and throbbed around dim doorways and dark windows. “Where are we going?”

“What difference does it make?” asked Doreen. “You’re out on the town with a sexy girl on your arm. Stop thinking and enjoy.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“Why not?” she said. “This is the real world, Bookboy. You know,” she added confidentially, “even Harvard professors leave the ivy-covered halls and blow off a little steam from time to time.”

“It’s the buildings that are ivy-covered, not the halls,” he corrected her.

“Roger, come down off the sixty-fourth floor. The air is too thin up there for life.”

“Why do you keep belittling our work?” he asked, “Television is the greatest invention of the century, maybe the greatest since the invention of fire.”

“You never heard of penicillin, I take it,” she said sardonically. “Or Botox.”

“Antibiotics are certainly wonderful breakthroughs, but they save sick people. Television saves everyone. Surely you’ve seen movies from the pre-television era: Abbott and Costello talking nonsense about who was on first base, private detectives walking into a hail of bullets and never getting hurt, Hoot Gibson and James Cagney being held up as examples of American manhood.”

“There were good movies too, you know,” said Doreen.

“But nobody watched them, so they stopped making them. Nobody wanted to know that Frankenstein’s monster spoke perfect English and had a soul; they just wanted to be scared into mindlessness. Or James Bond. Here’s a secret agent, a covert agent, and he can walk into any bar in the world and someone is sure to say ‘Shaken, not stirred’—and no one objects or guffaws. Movies dumb the public down; it’s up to television to pull people back up.” Roger could feel his adrenaline flowing as he warmed to his subject. “Same thing with popular literature. Before people like Tweed came along, junk like sci-fi and thrillers and romance dominated the bestseller lists. Now thoughtful essays and avant-garde poetry get the readerships they deserve.”

“Just because books are bought doesn’t mean they’re read,” said Doreen. “I think Stephen Hawking proved that years ago.” She paused in front of a double door painted a lascivious shade of red. The humming neon sign above it read All Night Long Lounge. “What if people just want to escape?”

“From what?” he asked, genuinely puzzled.

“From the culture Tweed and acolytes like you are forcing on them.”

“Ridiculous!” he snapped.

“Speaking of ridiculous, we’re here.” She gestured at the door. “I want you to see this show.”

“What is it?”

“Something very funny.”

“Well, the network can always use more humorists. Mort Sahl is getting a little long in the tooth, and Lord Buckley and Severn Darden both died a few years ago.”

“Well, Woody Allen did apply for a job with us. So did Nichols and May.”

He sniffed contemptuously. “Too lowbrow.”

“But people understand them,” she said. “How many people do you think understood Lord Buckley, or Ken Nordeen’s Word Jazz?”

“Our job is to make them understand.”

Her eyebrows arched and for a moment he thought she might laugh at him.

“Let me amend that,” he said hastily. “Our job is to expose them to such things, and give them the cultural tools to comprehend and appreciate what they’re seeing and hearing.”

“I was wondering what our job was,” she said, and as happened so often when they spoke, he had no idea how to answer her.

A well-dressed couple walked past them and entered the club, and Doreen turned to Roger. “So, we can stand here arguing all night, or we can go in.”

“Wait,” said Roger. “How much is this going to cost?”

“Nothing,” she said. “They know I’ve been scouting the talent here, and I told them I’d be bringing along a consultant tonight.”

Roger didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed. If this was just business, then he’d have to lower his expectations. But if it was just business, why did she keep flirting with him? He opened the door and held it for her.

They passed through and were immediately greeted by the doormanbot, who was wearing a gorilla suit. He greeted Doreen warmly and allowed them to pass through. A skimpily clad hostess (which, decided Roger, was just one tiny step more acceptable than a scantily clad hostess) escorted them to a table very near the small stage.

Soon a scantily clad waitress approached them and asked for their orders.

“I’ll have a Manhattan,” said Doreen.

“And the gentleman?”

“Just coffee,” he said. When both women stared at him, he fidgeted uneasily and added, “I have to have my senses about me if I’m evaluating talent. One drink and I’ll probably miss half of the subtleties and nuances.”

“He’ll have a martini,” announced Doreen. As the waitress walked off, she said to Roger, “Not to worry. These people check their nuances at the door.”

“Then why are we here?” he asked earnestly.

“Just relax and we’ll discuss it later.”

The drinks arrived, and Roger took a sip of his martini. He tried not to make a face as it went down. It was the drink of the masses, and he found himself wishing for a ’48 Chardonnay, or possibly a ’51 Dom made entirely from grapes raised on the north slope. (In truth, his tastebuds couldn’t tell the difference between Dom Perignon and Two Buck Chuck, but that, he knew, was merely because they weren’t yet properly educated. He watched all three of UN’s wine shows religiously, and he by God knew good from bad, even if his mouth didn’t—another gift of television to the drab, empty lives of its audience.)

Suddenly the lights dimmed, and a fat man in a sad sack suit sidled nervously onto the stage. He had a receding hairline and bulging eyes almost as big as ping-pong balls. He goggled at the audience, as if he expected that they might start throwing things at him. For a long moment, he said nothing. The room went quiet as well. He shuffled from foot to foot in the spotlight in front of a microphone. Roger thought maybe he had wandered onto the stage by accident. Then he crooked a finger between the collar of his shirt and his neck, loosening his tie.

“I get no respect,” he said. “I took my wife to a fancy restaurant on her birthday and I made a toast. ‘To the best woman a man ever had.’ The waiter joined me.”

The room exploded into laughter.

“My wife and I were happy for twenty years. Then we met.”

A man at the next table doubled over and banged his head against the tabletop.

There followed another ten minutes of one-liners, none of them new, and none, in Roger’s opinion, the least bit funny. The alleged comedian complained about his wife, his kids, his doctor and his dog, a sad litany of abuse and misunderstanding.

“They actually pay this man to stand up there and spout this drivel?” whispered Roger.

“They not only pay Rodney Dangerfield to perform,” replied Doreen, “but you’ll notice that every table in the house is full.”

“But he belongs in a saloon a century ago!” said Roger. “This whole act is about how stupid he is.”

“Everyone laughed,” she said. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“It means we’ve got our work cut out for us,” said Roger grimly.

“Nothing else?” she persisted.

“Should it?” he asked, confused.

She looked pityingly at him and sighed. “No, I suppose not.”

“So can we go now?”

“This is just the opening act,” said Doreen. “We’re here for the headliners.”

“If I have to sit through anything else like this Dangerfield, I’m going to need another martini,” said Roger, signaling to the waitress.

The drink arrived. Roger was just lifting it to his lips when the place erupted in such a deafening roar that he almost spilled its contents.

“What is it?” he asked, looking up.

“The stars of the show,” said Doreen.

Two old men strode onto the stage. One, tall and handsome, carried his age well. He strode confidently to the microphone and began crooning a melodic tune. Meanwhile the other shuffled out among the tables, picking up customer’s drinks and sniffing them, looking down women’s dresses and mugging shamelessly every time his partner hit a high note. He might have been skinny once but now had gone to fat. He seemed to move with difficulty.

“What do you think of his voice?” asked Doreen.

“Well, it’s sure as hell not La Traviata.”

“I didn’t ask what you thought of the song.”

“How can I tell about his voice if he won’t sing an aria?” replied Roger.

“Not everyone sings opera, and not everyone likes opera,” she noted.

“Not everyone likes coming in out of the rain,” he shot back. “I don’t see your point.”

Just then the fat man with the uncertain step seemed to slip on something. His arms windmilling wildly, he caught himself by sitting briefly on the lap of a woman with enough blonde hair to stuff a pillow, then rolled off her to onto his knees and rested his head on the shoes of her date. The slow-motion pratfall sent the audience into paroxysms of laughter.

“Hey Lllaaadddyyy!” He stared up at the blonde with a grin. “Don’t worry, lady. I’m all right, but your boyfriend needs a shine.”

The comedian clambered gracelessly to his feet, pawing at the woman as he did, then crossed his eyes and started complaining about the singing in a high, whining voice.

“If you think you can do better, Jerry,” said the singer, “go ahead and try.”

“You bet I can, Dean!” whined Jerry. Then, to the audience, “I’ll murder the bum.”

He began singing, horribly off-key, and the audience began laughing again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if you think that’s bad,” said Dean, “you should hear it in French.”

“My God!” muttered Roger. “This is what passes for entertainment in this place!” He turned to Doreen. “I can’t take any more of this. I feel like I’m losing my mind. I’m dizzy. I have to get some air!”

“All right,” she said unhappily. She left a tip on the table and then led him through the maze of people and chairs until they reached the exit.

“That was dreadful!” he said when the world stopped spinning around him.

“Those are the most popular acts in New York, Roger,” said Doreen. “Maybe there’s something wrong with you.”

He stared at her. "This is all some kind of practical joke, right?"

"No," she said seriously. "I intend to use whatever clout I have to get the network to hire them and start a variety show."

"We already have a variety show, in case it's slipped your mind," said Roger. "We've had St. Martin-in-the-Fields Choir, Allen Ginsberg's Poetry Slam, Pilobolus, the Kronos Quartet . . ."

"Roger, we're giving the people what we think they should have," said Doreen. "I think it's about time we started giving them what they want."

"They don't know what they want!" Roger shouted. "A baby doesn't want to stop suckling at its mother's breast. A two-year-old child doesn't want to learn to use a toilet. A six-year-old doesn't want to go to school. We teach them to accept things for their own good, and thanks to television and visionary men like Nader and Murrow and, yes, Tweed in his limited way, we don't have to stop teaching them just because they've grown up and left school."

"You left out one important thing, Roger," she said.

"Oh?" he replied. "And what is that?"

"The element of choice."

"Do you give a child the choice between touching a live wire and not touching it?" asked Roger.

"We're not talking about children, Roger," said Doreen.

"All right then, what if you're right?" said Roger. "Have you ever seriously considered that?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if you're right?" he repeated. "What if you gave the unwashed masses their choice?"

"It would be a good thing," said Doreen. "There's room on television for everything."

He shook his head. "If that audience tonight was typical, then Martin and Lewis and Rodney Dangerfield won't share time with Mort Sahl. They'll share it with dumb weekly shows about dippy housewives and teenaged hippies and country hicks outsmarting city slickers. Dance bands and crooners won't share time with Pavarotti and Domingo; they'll shove them into the shadows and their places will be taken by more tuneless music, aimed at the least sophisticated tastes. And worst of all, the news shows will be unable to hold an audience unless they start covering beauty pageants and diet fads and crimes no one has any reason to care about."

"That's the silliest thing I ever heard," said Doreen.

"The bad always drives out the good," answered Roger. "Why do you think I keep working for a mean, self-centered son of a bitch like Tweed? Because he's what stands between us and Dangerfield. Can't you see that? Ed Murrow is what stops the Super Bowl from being more important than the war in Uruguay. We have a sacred mission to uplift and educate."

"Jesus, you really are brainwashed, aren't you?" said Doreen. She sighed deeply. "I'm sorry I wasted your evening, Roger."

He took her home, and, for the first time in months, didn't have the urge to kiss and paw her. In fact, suddenly the thought of touching her made his skin crawl.

Which was probably just as well. After he reported her to Chairman Nader and the others, there was no question that she would lose her job, and at least now he wouldn't feel guilty about it.

His decision made, he made his way to his apartment to watch the late-night opera and ballet, resisting the urge to look up and see if his halo was visible.