

Leave Off Doves

by Sarah Long

Midway through the fall semester, an unremarkable girl in Professor Woody's Advanced Fiction workshop dyed her hair an unnatural shade of dark, changed her name to Tasmina, and turned in a story filled with made-up words. She handed out the story to her classmates to be work shopped the following week, and in it, the main character "rebusively" studied her face in a bathroom mirror as the "perlifitous" water filled the bathtub.

Some students were dumbstruck, unsure of a particular word's existence and not wanting to sound ignorant in class if they questioned the author's use of an adjective that everyone else understood. Others were outraged. Words like "hiccombed" and "apluish" were a smack in the face to all their years of training in the proper use of language. Some were even a little jealous, although they would never let on. They hadn't thought to break the rules, and here this girl was broadcasting her rebellion to all her classmates and the professor.

The students filtered into class that day, taking their usual seats. Tasmina was the last to arrive, head down and eyes averted, mere moments before Professor Woody entered, his hair and clothes characteristically rumpled, taking up his perch on the desk at the front of the room.

Woody had worked at the university for nearly twenty years. He always tried to remain a helpful, objective teacher, resisting the urge to let his personal feelings about his students and their writing abilities influence his treatment of them. In such a subjective field, this was difficult to do. He held a professional distance from his students. He politely declined invitations to graduation parties and wrote generous yet restrained recommendation letters whenever he was asked, no matter the student. Through the years, of course he favored some students over others, but he would never reveal such personal biases.

“All right, class,” he began. “We're discussing Tasmina's story today, is that correct?” He knew damn well whose story they were work shopping. The truth was, he had loved Tasmina's story, was floored by it, and he couldn't remember the last time a student's work had evoked such a strong feeling in him. But his question, the same opener he used every week, was his attempt to keep the playing field level and dispel any suspicions his students had about preferential treatment.

The students shifted in their chairs, pulling their heavily marked copies of “Elephant Summer” from backpacks and binders. Tasmina sat hunched over her desk, flicking absently at the eggplant-colored polish on her fingernails, pen and paper ready for the notes she might take as she was forced to sit silently through her classmates' remarks.

No one spoke. The students flipped through pages, pretending to go over their notes or scribble new ones.

“Who wants to start?” Woody prompted, and when the students continued to shuffle and avoid his gaze, he said, “Mary, how about you?”

Mary was a safe bet to start things off. Always trying to say something nice about a classmate's work, vague in her criticisms, she had nearly burst into tears three weeks prior when the class work shopped her contribution, a story about a dying grandmother whose last wish to be reunited with her childhood love is fulfilled by her grandson the day before she dies. Granny's dying words, as she holds her grandson's hand in her left and her sweetheart's in her right are, “Now my life is complete and my memory will live on in the love we have shared.” Woody did everything but physically intervene as Mary's classmates ripped her story apart as “formulaic,” “too sappy to be believable” and “Hollywood-influenced schlock.”

Now Mary smiled hesitantly in Tasmina's direction and began, “I really liked it? The main character is really relatable and I understand what she's going through? The descriptions are really vivid? Like the stuff with the dumpster in the alley?”

Mary turned to look at Woody, begging him with her eyes to let her off the hook.

“Okay Mary, thank you,” he nodded, and her body visibly unclenched. “Who's next?”

Stefan, the blonde Canadian whose stories always consisted of poorly disguised metaphors about his one and only homosexual encounter, cleared his throat. “I really liked the title. I mean, initially, when I first picked it up, I was like, ‘Hey, this will be interesting.’ But then, well, I guess I was expecting to see an actual elephant somewhere in the story. I was like, waiting for it, you know? So that was kind of disappointing,”

Woody blinked. “So...your suggestion for Tasmina is to place an elephant in the text of the story?”

Stefan tapped the butt of his pen against his cheek. “Well, no...not necessarily. I guess it's more about setting up expectations for the reader. I mean, titles are important, you know? There has to be a payoff. I guess that's what I'm saying.”

Woody had his good days and bad days. This one, it seemed, was shaping up to be a bad one. He tried to give his students the benefit of the doubt. They were, after all, still young and inexperienced, oblivious to the harsh world beyond the safety of their parents' homes and sheltered college campus. Whenever he felt the urge to laugh in their faces or physically shake them out of their idealistic reveries, he had to remember himself as he was at their age. Idealistic for sure, and cocky, bordering on conceited, certain that whatever some crusty, burnout professor had to say was just a result of his own bitterness and personal failures.

He eyed the clock. Soon he'd have to drive into town to meet his wife at Dr. Helbert's office for their weekly therapy session. Three months ago, Tracy had packed a small suitcase and moved out of their house. Woody stood useless by the kitchen table as she washed and dried the dishes from the previous night's dinner, her last wifely duty before leaving.

He remembered feeling blocked, stripped of the words and inflections that had flowed so freely to him for the better part of his

life. He remembered thinking that if only he could find the right words, the perfect symbols to convey with absolute clarity his feelings, he could stop her from leaving. But the only words that came to him seemed artificial and vague. Still, he had to say something.

“Don't go,” he blurted. “Things can be better.”

Tracy turned off the faucet and faced him, her graying but still luminous auburn hair flowing wildly around her shoulders.

“Better,” she repeated blankly. “What does that word even mean?”

So for the past several weeks, the only time he spent with Tracy was in the presence of another man, a shrink who showcased all his framed diplomas like trophies on the walls of his Scandinavian-furnished office. Woody and Tracy sat on the same hard leather couch, the length of a sports car separating their bodies. Dr. Helbert sat before them in his designer chair, a slim, silver laptop poised and ready to receive notes on the state of the deteriorating couple.

Woody had grown angry that the only time he was allowed to see his wife was in these previously scheduled allotments of time, these “sessions” where a stranger with a half a million dollar education was supposed to know how to fix them. A couple weeks ago, after one of their doctor visits, Woody casually asked Tracy if she wanted to grab a cup of coffee.

“I don't think I'm ready for that yet,” she said. “Let's just stick to our therapy for now.”

Woody couldn't contain his frustration. “How the fuck is anything going to change if the only time we spend together is in a goddamned fish bowl?”

Tracy barely flinched. “It's going to take time.”

Time, Woody thought. *What does that word even mean?*

He snapped back to the present to see Jenny, one of the class's best writers save for the unfortunately large chip on her shoulder, shoot her hand into the air. Even before she spoke, Woody could tell she meant to do some damage.

“Yes Jenny?”

She lowered her arm, took her time folding her hands on her desk. “Well, since no one else is gonna say it...” Her voice was clipped, and she paused dramatically. “This *story* is just a bunch of made-up words strung together! I mean, ‘figgish’? ‘Barnification’? ‘MAGALANT’?!”

She flipped rapidly through the pages, her voice growing more shrill with each word she spoke.

The students collectively squirmed and Woody stole a glance at Tasmina, who was the only one sitting perfectly still, eyes forward on her manuscript, pen held steady between her fingers. Woody could swear he saw the smallest smile curling at the edges of her mouth.

“I mean, what the fuck is this?!” Jenny shrieked. “Does she think we're stupid or something?”

Well, at least she refrained from addressing the author directly, Woody reasoned.

“I have to agree with Jenny,” Clint, the quiet country boy, chimed in. “I didn't feel insulted, exactly, but the, uh, made-up words were a little distracting.”

“Okay, Clint. Could you say more about that?” Woody had to make at least one student back up his criticism with concrete evidence, before the whole class got whipped into a frenzy.

Clint sat thoughtfully for a moment. “Well, the made-up words, like the ones Jenny mentioned, when I came across them in the story, I got sort of stuck. I would have to stop reading for a second and think, ‘Hey, that's not a real word.’ I guess it just didn't make sense to me. Why not use words we all know and understand?”

The classroom was deflated. Clint had voiced everyone's disapproval without a hint of venom. If anyone carried on, drew out the matter to the point of redundancy, it would be useless if not cruel.

“All right,” Woody stepped in. “Does anyone else have comments for Tasmina's story?”

The week before Tracy left, a couple of mourning doves had claimed one of the light fixtures on their porch, setting to work building a nest. The male dove retrieved all the supplies: twigs, dry leaves, downy moss, and brought them back to the female who piled them together, slowly turning her small, round body, making a spot for her eggs to fall.

Woody would never have noticed the birds' activities had it not been for Tracy's attention to such things. She was shocked by his obliviousness.

"How could you not notice?" she asked. "Haven't you heard them singing to each other?"

Woody was embarrassed, and reminded himself to try and be more observant, but only a few days later he had forgotten again, and as he went to flip on the porch light before they went to bed one night, Tracy screamed.

"You're going to scare them away!"

It took him a few moments to realize what she was talking about.

After Tracy left, Woody taped the porch's light switch into the OFF position and covered it with a neon yellow Post-It note reading: LEAVE OFF DOVES. This way, even if he forgot again, he would be reminded before he could do any damage.

The students who had yet to speak avoided Woody's eyes.

"Okay," he said after a few moments. "Tasmina? Would you like to say anything?"

Woody always dreaded this part of the workshop. He felt terrible for the student whose work had been ripped to shreds by his classmates, whose face always registered a kind of shell-shock, who would rather melt into a puddle and slide under the door than have to address the room, thank his classmates for their "helpful suggestions" and tell them he "had a feeling" the story's ending was crap.

Or there was the student whose story had been praised and fawned over, the only criticism being that there was hardly anything to criticize. Woody would find himself loathing this student once he was allowed to talk, addressing his classmates like a visiting

professional, a pimply-faced teenager regarding the “craft” of writing, the skillful execution of foreshadowing and complex metaphors.

But as Tasmina put down her pen and made eye contact with him for the first time, Woody hoped she would be as unpredictable as her story and fall into neither category.

“I appreciate everyone taking the time to read my story,” she said, her voice plain, her face unreadable. “I didn't expect everyone to like it.”

The students waited, hanging, expecting Tasmina to offer explanation, more effusive gratitude, some kind of apology. But instead, she began to quietly pack her things. Slowly, the students followed her lead, some of them grumbling under their breath, others scurrying out of the room before Woody could ask them about missing assignments.

Tasmina was the last student left, leisurely reaching down to tie the laces on her left sneaker.

Woody didn't understand the meaning of the word depressed. If he thought about it, he would picture ceaseless crying, a carpeted floor strewn with crumpled tissues, late night infomercials, a ratty bathrobe and slippers, Chinese takeout boxes filled with spoiling food, unreturned phone calls, a trash can full of empty wine bottles. If he thought about it, he would never picture a monotonous life with a decent salary, benefits and a summer vacation, too many leftovers in the fridge because the cook only knows how to prepare meals for two, a friendly relationship with the campus security night guard, a weekend spent repainting the guest bedroom a unisex color of Celery Green, a preoccupation with researching the mating habits and life span of mourning doves on the internet late at night, the persistent habit of washing the left-side pillowcase with the rest of the bedding even though it had gone unused for weeks.

If he thought about it, Woody would realize he didn't understand the meaning of a lot of words anymore, if he ever really did. Better. Time. Love. Husband. Wife. Teacher. Student.

Tasmina slung her backpack over her shoulder and headed for the door.

"Tasmina, may I speak to you for a moment?"

She turned and approached Woody at his desk. He wanted to tell her something, and he wracked his brain, once again finding himself blocked, stripped. He thought if only he could find the right words, the perfect symbols, he could tell this girl something good, something she deserved to hear.

"I'm sorry about my story," she said, giving him the apology she had reserved from her classmates. "I understand if you're upset. It's just, I hear people use the same words over and over again, and I start to forget what any of them mean, what any of them *should* mean. So, yeah, I made up some words, and maybe that's cheating, but at least I *know* what they mean." She blinked, her eyes pointing squarely at Woody's face.

"You don't need to apologize," he said. "It's not cheating. I just have a suggestion for you. For your next story."

Tasmina waited patiently for him to continue.

"Use *deraveled* in a sentence," he said finally.

She looked at him strangely. It wasn't exactly a made-up word, but it was the only thing he could come up with. She nodded, gave a small smile, and left the room.

The next week, Tasmina was not in Woody's class. He thought perhaps she was sick, but she was absent again the week after that and the week after that. Woody went to the administration office and was told that Tasmina, or Rachel Smith as the school records knew her, had withdrawn from school, giving no forwarding address.

For weeks thereafter, Woody worried that he was somehow to blame for her decision. He wondered what he could have done differently, how he could have been a better teacher, mentor, friend.

Better. What does that word even mean?

One day late in the spring, Woody returned to his office after class to find a manila envelope inscribed with his name sitting atop his desk. There was no postage; the envelope must have been hand-delivered. Woody opened it and pulled out a manuscript, a short

story entitled "Daffodil Speaks." The author's name was nowhere to be found.

Woody took a seat behind his desk and started to read. He knew immediately that it was Tasmina's story.

The first sentence read, "The green and gold lights from the city deraveled over the hills, a trail of purpulascence setting every blade of grass oblase."

