

TENSIONS

by

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Brap ! Crude acoustic news. Not wholly unexpected, it received our mixed reaction of plain annoyance and feigned disgust. The offally taint of the immediate air inspired a pallisade of turned backs around the offender and a circuit of ersatz gasps and groans. Had Ripley done it again? The option of disbelief dissolved in the acrid truth. This time in the middle of Tucker's desultory mumble of his Cicero homework. The letter to Papirius Paetus, IX, 21, which begins, "Really? You think you are out of your mind to be imitating my 'thunderbolts'?" Old Rip had been planning this one.

Father Shaker brooked no breach of classroom decorum. Even if the law did not concern itself with trifles, ("De minimis non curat lex" he expounded) the morose priest did in all respects value punctillious adherence to his classical ideal of gentlemanly scholarship and a nuanced appreciation of mature behaviour: self-sacrifice, industry and restraint.

Brip ! Another! Pandemonium immanent. Cicero stopped dead in his tracks.

"What, pray tell, is going on back there? Is someone sick?" the priest inquired with zombie dryness, for he knew quite well that it was Ripley, again.

From the rear, Franciscus, the class orator intoned with mock seriousness: "*Infandum magistrum iubes renovare dolorem,*" with reference to the second book of the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas can hardly bring himself to recount for Queen Dido the sorry tale of the Fall of Troy. The class exploded in a blast of pent up hilarity, a bomb of boisterous release.

Diminuendo and, after a bit, subsidence.

"Do you think," the cleric inquired with mock deference, rocking, as was his habit, back and forth, heel to toe, with his opened Cicero tightly pressed upon his chest "that we could have a window open back there? It does seem immoderately close in here this morning, wouldn't you say Mr. Ripley?"

More guffawing, all in Ripley's direction. Then a little light went on in the priest's eye. "With the window open the elimination of the culprit will be facilitated." Gales of admiring laughter. The Shaker had won again. Back to Cicero.

"Tense, tense, tense," he lectured, "the timing of the verb gives Latin thought its subtlety." He knew that this point was too fine for us. "Present tense, past tense, future tense, the perfect and pluperfect tenses, the future perfect... ." His litany of the tenses nearly got us going again, but we swallowed it down. Finally, the bell and exit from the tribal air of Father Shaker's senior Latin class.

How we loved him, and knew that, in a unique way, he loved us, though he never gave a common sign of his feelings; it all came down to the way we handled syntax: words finely ordered, with the exact placement of the verb, paramount. He was showing us something in himself that he thought we ought to know: the ennobling effect of precise language on the intellect. The giants of the ancient world, Vercingetorix, Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, spectres of power and ambition, walked out of his mouth to loom over us hunched at our coded texts. He made them seem to us as men he had known.

He rarely smiled but had the most penetrating sense of humour any of us had encountered; he was a throwback, a true wit, using humour as a form of knowledge. Convulsion often ensued from his dry monologues on the ancient world. He knew boys and had every one of us on mental tape, the key foibles. He pointedly confused our names in his dissembling aloofness. He would look up, for example, if attention was waning, pick the centre of the distraction, (frequently it was Crook) and he'd probe: "You, Crozier, try to maintain focal distance on that page will you,?" knowing that Crook, his nose just above his pencil point, was scrambling to get his physics homework done for next period. A punning, paradoxical man he was, and precise as a knife in perception.

Language live with the art of his humour lifted us up. His gift to us was belief in the power of words and their arrangements. And always he emphasized precision in the tense of the verb as the key to good Latin, and life. He hounded, pounded, cajoled and coerced us to take such care with words. And he bore with equanimity our cloacal play in his Latin room, for, the truth be known, Ripley was not alone in his devotion to the uses of flatulence as a rhetorical figure.

Impending at the end of our senior year was our departure from his tutelage, from his hyperborean love of Latin and boys. We wanted him to know how we felt; that was easy, but what we did had to have exquisite appropriateness, exactly the right thing for us and him. We were desperate to freight the moment with memory.

The solution to our problem came to us unexpectedly at lunch one day when we inveigled Father Green, the lunchroom proctor, into dilating on the eating habits of his confreres. From what he said about Father Shaker we adduced that the man suffered from extreme constipation. A cloacal end to our association was thus enfranchised. Each member of the class agreed that he would bring to the Latin room on the last day, a box of Kellogg's All Bran, which in those days announced on a diagonal band across the face of the box "For Constipation." A place at his desk was set for the satirical meal: mat, bowl, dish, cutlery, milk and sugar. Out of schoolbags came the bran, about thirty boxes in all, heaped up on his desk.

Punctually, he entered, stood, *super antiquas vias*, beside the desk, with a pinched expression on his face. He was not pleased.

"Well, what is this," he demanded.

"It's for you father," timorously braved from the back.

"I see," he tried, still not quite clear about an attitude.

A stronger voice cried "Speech." A few more voices joined in, "speech, speech." Dead air. Not what we expected. Finally his face lightened but with his eyes admitting a subtle shine.

Silence again.

He had opened his book to the lesson (thinking) and one last time he laid that intimidating text across his chest and began to rock back and forth.

"Boys," he said, drawing out the words for emphasis, "I never will have been moved like this in all my life."

That one sentence with its perfect verb gave historical shape to our immemorial love and respect for this man of words who had made each of us a better person in a fundamental way. We went away happy, most of us, carrying a love of language into the world. We had begun to live like men who could talk.

He died a couple of years later, while I was out of the city at university. Intestinal cancer, in his early fifties. He knew he had it, of course - the pain, the inconvenience - but went on teaching almost to the end, his grievance contained in his humour.