'*HEFT* is a suspenseful, restorative novel from one of our fine young voices'
COLUM MCCANN, author of *LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN*

Contents

About the Book

Former academic Arthur Opp weighs 550 pounds and hasn't left his rambling Brooklyn home in a decade. Twenty miles away, in Yonkers, seventeen-year-old Kel Keller navigates life as the poor kid in a rich school and pins his hopes on what seems like a promising sporting career – if he can untangle himself from his family drama. The link between this unlikely pair is Kel's mother, Charlene, a former student of Arthur's. After nearly two decades of silence, it is Charlene's unexpected phone call to Arthur – a plea for help – that jostles them into action.

Through Arthur and Kel's own quirky and lovable voices, *Heft* tells the winning story of two improbable heroes whose sudden connection transforms both their lives. *Heft* is a novel about love and family found in the most unexpected places.

About the Author

Liz Moore is a writer, musician and teacher. Her debut novel, *The Words of Every Song*, was published in 2007, and she recently released her album *Backyards*. She is a professor at Holy Family University in Philadelphia, where she lives.

Also by Liz Moore

The Words of Every Song

HEFT

Liz Moore

Hutchinson
London

For my mother, Christine

Acknowledgments

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Arthur

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The first thing you must know about me is that I am colossally fat. When I knew you I was what one might call plump but I am no longer plump. I eat what I want & furthermore I eat whenever I want. For years I have made very little effort to reduce the amount that I eat for I have seen no cause to. Despite this I am neither immobile nor bedridden but I do feel winded when I walk more than six or seven steps, & I do feel very shy and sort of encased in something as if I were a cello or an expensive gun.

I have no way of knowing exactly what I weigh but I estimate that it is between five and six hundred pounds. The last time I went to a doctor's office was years ago and back then I weighed four hundred eighty pounds & they had to put me on a special scale. The doctor looked at me & told me I was very surely on a path toward early death.

Second. In my letters to you these two decades I have been untruthful by omission. For shortly after I last saw you a variety of circumstances combined to make it impossible for me to continue my academic career. About this—about many things—I have been unforthcoming. My references to former friends and colleagues are memories. I have not worked as a professor for eighteen years.

Last & most important: I no longer go out of my house.

Fortunately it is a very nice house & largely I am proud of it. I did not purchase it; it was bestowed upon me. It is 25 feet wide. Very wide for this block. & once it was very

lovely inside and out, decorated very nicely, O this when I was a small boy. But now I fear I have allowed it to fall into a sort of haunted disrepair. Only scraps of its loveliness remain: the piano (I played when I was a boy); the bookshelves around the fireplace; the furniture, which once was what they call high-end, but at this point has been sinking slowly toward the floor for forty years because it has borne the weight of me on its back. There are nice things on the upper floors I suppose but I haven't seen them in a decade. I have no reason to go up there. I couldn't if I tried. My bedroom and everything I need are on this floor, my little world, & outside my window is the only view I need. The state of the house is one of the things I'm most ashamed of, for I have always loved the house, & sometimes when I am sentimental I feel the house loves me as well.

Because I no longer go outside, I have become very good at ordering whatever I need online. My home sometimes feels like a shipping center; every day, sometimes twice a day, somebody brings something to me. The FedEx man, the UPS man. So you see I'm not entirely a shut-in because I must sign for these things. And what leaves my house does so in garbage bags that I toss to the curb from my top step, very late at night, when it's dark out.

There are companies now for everything. One for bringing you your books and newspapers and magazines. One for sending you supplies you might need from a pharmacy. Even one that lets you order your groceries online and then brings them to your house for you. An old-fashioned concept in some ways, a wonderful innovation in others. Once a week I select my supplies on their website. They have everything, this company—everything you could possibly think of. Prepared foods & raw ingredients. Desserts & breakfasts & wine & toilet paper. Cheese & deli meat & ice cream & cake & bagels & Pop'ems, little doughy confections that Entenmann's bakes & then

sprinkles with holiday-themed colors. Now it is October & my Pop'ems are orange and black.

A man brings my food to my home on Tuesday nights. I made sure to choose the after 5 p.m. *option when I joined, which pleases me: I like to think the deliveryman might believe I work all day and am just getting home. I'm very silly in this way! On the phone with customer service representatives, I casually mention family or work. How are you today, Mr Opp? asks the lady representative from Bank of America, and I sigh and say, Swamped. A little joke. In the same way, I delight in answering the door for my grocery delivery with a tie loosened about my neck and an air of exhaustion and world-weary distractedness. You can leave it just inside the door, I always say, & then walk into the kitchen, calling back over my shoulder little mundanities about the weather or a sports team. Once the boxes are all accounted for, I tip the driver with cash that I keep hidden in a drawer on my nightstand, on the inside of a hollow book. I obtained the book as a child—it was my prized possession, a hollow book!—and it has proven useful to me since. All the food I order for delivery is paid for by credit card on the phone. Tipping is the only thing I need cash for, so for a long time I have relied on the large store of bills that years ago I procured from the bank. I have no plan for when they run out. I never thought I'd need one.*

The very very last time I went out of my house was in September of 2001, when I grew so lonesome watching the news that I opened my door and walked to the bottom of my stoop and sat on it, my head in my hands, for an hour. & I wished I had someone to talk to. It felt as if the world could end. Some very bad memories came to me one after another in a row. I heard what I thought was a woman screaming but that turned out to be peacocks that occupy the courtyard of a church near my brownstone. Then I hauled myself up and I walked to the end of the block, and

then I walked one block beyond that, & then another, & then another. Finally I reached the corner of Ninth Street and Eighth Avenue, where two groups of women were standing in tight little circles, visibly upset. One young lady, holding a bewildered two-year-old in her arms, was crying and being heartily consoled by a friend. When I walked by them they hushed and looked. Beyond them I had a view all the way down Ninth Street toward the water & the horizon, and if I squinted and looked to my right I thought I could see black smoke rising into the sky, though I could not see downtown. Now I used to go into Manhattan quite a bit when I was younger & Manhattan was of course where I used to teach & although I didn't like teaching I thought of my students and my former colleagues & prayed for their safety and well-being. I thought of you & felt glad your dreams of living in Manhattan had not come true. I was overwhelmed with sorrow and nostalgia—self-pity and pity for others, which, in me, are often the same emotion. I stood until my feet could no longer bear my own weight and then I lumbered back, pausing seven times to catch my breath. The women were gone now and the streets were empty. At the bottom of my stoop I looked up to the top of my own twelve steps and vowed that I would not leave again, because you see I had no one to call, and no one called me on that day, & so that's how I knew I did not need to go out of my house anymore.

Since that day I have been completely reclusive. Of course my natural tendency has been toward solitude from the time I was a boy, but for many years I had family & other people who kept me from shuttering myself in too tightly. I had you for a while, and people like you. But I am no longer in touch with any friends or relatives. My mother was dear to me but she died young. For several reasons that I will give you if you care to know, I do not speak to the rest of my family. Nevertheless, they have made me financially stable for the rest of my life & I do not need to

earn money to be so. This too has helped me to get bigger and bigger & has allowed me to stay inside my cocoon of a house.

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Now I spend each day in much the same way. In the morning I furtively collect the newspaper from its place on my stoop. I paid the deliveryman once to make sure that he placed it at the very top. I read all of the articles. I read the obituaries, all of them, every day. I cook or assemble feasts for myself. I wake up and plan the day's meals and when I have something particularly good in the house I feel happy. I roam from room to room, a ghost, a large redfaced ghost, & sometimes I stop and look at a picture on the wall, & sometimes, in a particular corner or room, a memory comes to me of my past, and I pause until it has washed over me, until I feel once again alone. Sometimes I write to you. Sometimes a piece of my own furniture will make me stop and wonder where it came from. It's a feeling of disconnectedness: I don't know & I have no one to ask. Mostly, though, my house has grown so familiar to me that I don't see it.

The evening of what has come to be called, on the news, 9/11, I wrote you a letter to inquire about your whereabouts & within a week I had a letter back from you. You said you & your loved ones were fine. Whether or not you have known it you have been my anchor in the world. You & your letters & your very existence have provided me with more comfort than I can explain.

These are the things you must know about me & this is my apology for the many years I have misled you by intent or omission. The slow descent of my health & the ascent of my reclusiveness have occasionally made it difficult for me to

come up with suitable material for correspondence, & the fact of the matter is that I couldn't bear the thought of an end to ours.

In spite of everything, at heart I am still the same

Arthur

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WHEN I HAD finished it I held the letter in my hands before me & imagined sending it. Imagined very clearly folding it into sharp thirds & taking with my right hand the envelope & inserting with my left the letter. & then sealing it. & then inscribing it with Charlene's address, which I know as well as my own. O you coward, you coward, I thought, if you were worth anything you'd do it. While writing it I had felt a sort of grand relief, to be unburdening myself after so long, to someone I cared for so deeply. It was the letter I had always imagined writing to her. But unsurprisingly I was too afraid to send it, & so I told myself that it was a selfish sort of honesty, the sort that Charlene didn't need to be encumbered with anyway.

The events that prompted me to write it are as follows.

First, three days ago, the phone rang. I had been doing absolutely nothing & it gave me a very great shock. I nearly jumped out of my skin. I waited a few rings to let my breathing settle before I answered.

A voice came through the wires. "Arthur?" someone said. "Arthur Opp?"

Now I do not get many personal calls & my heart leapt at who it might be.

"Yes," I said, I whispered.

It was Charlene Turner. I did not expect to hear her voice ever again in my life but O God I was very glad to. I nearly

cried out but stopped myself. I clapped a hand over my mouth instead & bit the inner flesh of it.

It has been nearly two decades since I last saw her. The in-person relationship we had many years ago evolved naturally into a sort of steady and faithful written correspondence. But over these many years, our letters have become inexpressibly important to me. An outsider might call us only pen pals but over time I feel I have come to know Charlene Turner as well as I have ever known anyone, & have tentatively imagined that one day we would see each other again, we would resume our relationship, & all in all it would be very natural & easy.

Still: her call unnerved me.

We talked briefly & I tried to sound quite calm and relaxed but accidentally I told an extraordinary number of lies.

I wanted to say *Have you been receiving my letters*—it has been nearly a year since I have heard from her, and she used to write more often than that—but instead I said "How have you been."

She said, "All right." In such a way that it sounded as if she wanted me to understand the opposite.

We spoke for a while about nothing. I updated her on William, the brother whose closeness to me I exaggerated on a whim in one of my notes to her. I told her he was doing very well and was in fact retiring next year after a celebrated career as an architect. I told her that last month I had visited family in England and that yesterday I'd spent in Manhattan, visiting an old friend. Then I told her I'd taken up photography.

"Great," said Charlene, & I too said "Great."

"Are you still teaching?" said Charlene.

"No, I've stopped teaching," I said—I said without thinking.

And she said *O no* in such a way that she sounded utterly utterly disappointed & forlorn.

So I said “But I tutor now.” Just so it would seem as if I had been doing a little something all these years.

At this she brightened & told me that this was in fact why she was calling.

“I’m going to send you a letter, Arthur,” said Charlene. When I focused on her voice I realized she sounded very strange, faraway & remorseful, & slower than she was when I knew her, as if her tongue had gotten heavier. She very possibly sounded drunk. It was two in the afternoon.

“All right,” I said.

“Look for it,” she said. “You’re still at the same address,” she said.

“I am,” I said.

“Look for it,” she said again.

“All right,” I said.

“What will be in it,” I said, but she had already hung up the phone.

I sat on the couch for a while. Then I went into my bedroom & sat on my bed. Then I opened the drawer of my bedside table & from it pulled a stack of all the letters Charlene ever sent me. They are a slim volume altogether, perhaps forty pages in sum. Her handwriting in these letters is tight as a drum, small and overlapping. I read all of them in a row that evening—an indulgence I have rarely allowed myself over our two decades of correspondence—& I granted myself permission, just for a moment, to dream of Charlene, to remember our brief relationship with the same affection & passion that, for many years, has sustained me.

& then this morning, with nothing much else to do, I sat down and wrote the letter to her that I have composed over & over again in my head—the truth-telling letter, the healing admission of my darkest secrets—the letter I knew I would have to send her if we were ever to meet again. The letter I would, indeed, send her right this moment if I were not very cowardly indeed. As it turns out, however, I am.

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HERE IS CHARLENE TURNER: Walking into my classroom two decades ago, her cheeks as pink as a tulip, her face as round as a penny. Short and small, rabbitish, the youngest in the room by a decade. I too am young. The class is a seminar & we sit at a long oval table & as teacher I am at the head of it. Her lips do not gracefully close over her teeth. The frames of her glasses are too wide & they give her a look of being mildly cross-eyed. Her bangs are worked into an astounding arc at the top of her head. One can tell she has put thought into her outfit. Her shoulder pads threaten to eclipse her. She has turned up the cuffs of her blazer. She wears red and green and yellow. Accordingly she looks like a stoplight.

It is a night class. The other students are older, mothers and retirees. They are dressed in long black skirts and flowing blouses. Many are rich and idle, many are taking this class for pleasure. Not Charlene Turner. One by one we go round the table, identifying ourselves. I give my full name with Dr in front of it & then I tell my students to call me whatever they like. When Charlene's turn comes she opens her mouth and a very small noise comes out.

"Could you speak up, please?" I ask her.

"Charlene Turner," she says, & in her accent I detect something beautifully native, a New-Yorkness that none of the other students possess. She nearly drops the first *r* in her name. She comes very close to dropping it. When she speaks, she ducks her head like a boxer.

"Welcome, Charlene," is what I say.

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The university at which we met was an institution founded on progressive values & most of its students were similarly progressive. I taught in the extension program, in which nearly all of the students were also unusual in some way: commuters, adults who'd taken a few years to work after high school, people with full-time jobs who were enrolled in a degree program in the evening. Nontrads, we called them. (That I ever casually used this jargon, that I ever even knew it, amazes me.) Charlene Turner did & did not fit this mold. She had taken one year off after graduating from high school. Whether she was "progressive" or not, according to the school's tacit definition of it, I cannot say —we never spoke of politics. She lived with her parents in Yonkers. She worked as a receptionist in a dental office. Twice a week she took the subway in to attend my class: an hour's commute each way. But all of this I discovered later. At first she was just a student in my class, & a very quiet one at that.

She said nothing in class. She gazed at me steadily from halfway down our seminar table, blinking occasionally through her large glasses, observing her classmates respectfully. Only once during the entire semester did she ever speak, and it was to volunteer an answer that was incorrect. I didn't have the heart to correct her myself, so I turned to the class and allowed them to, and after that she returned to silence. But she came to visit me in my office several times. The first time she had the same wide-eyed look upon her face that she had in class, & she asked me a question that I can no longer remember about one of the texts that we'd read. She was very quiet still, & I did most of the talking. I shared an office in those days with another associate professor named Hans Hueber, whom I did not like, and upon her exit he turned to me & smiled & rolled his eyes as if he wanted me to be complicit in his ridicule of

Charlene's lack of intellect, or poise, or whatever it was he thought of her. But I would not meet his gaze.

She came to see me several times after that & we talked. Hans Hueber stopped smirking & turned to sighing in annoyance upon her entrance. Charlene had no natural aptitude for the sort of literature we were reading. She ascribed emotions to the characters that, it was clear, she herself would feel in their place—or she judged them as people, rather than literature. When asked to critically analyze a text, she would list all the reasons that a character was good or bad, right or wrong. She wrote a whole paper on *Medea* in which she stated, over and over again, in several different ways, that Medea was selfish and evil. In my comments, I told her she had to think about the meaning of the text, to formulate an argument about the text. To think of Medea as a tool for unlocking the play's hidden code. She came to my office hours & told me she did not understand. She looked hurt & bewildered. She thought she had done well.

"Why do you think she's selfish?" I asked her.

"She shouldn't have killed her children," said Charlene. "She should have killed herself."

I remember it all. I remember her expression.

"But killing her children was her way of protecting them," I said. I was playing devil's advocate. "She didn't want them to suffer."

"They could have taken care of themselves," said Charlene. She looked at me fiercely. She was wearing a bright pink sweater with a ridiculous pattern on it. She wore this sweater quite a bit. Her bangs were especially high that day. She put one small & bony hand on my desk and left it there, a kind of appeal. She would not be swayed. I found myself not wanting to sway her. Her refusal or inability to think academically about the texts struck me as something noble. I now realize that I probably failed her as a teacher. But by then I was captivated by her & I lost

my own ability to think critically. Maybe I did her a disservice. I think I did. I think I treated her differently than I would have treated any other student.

She continued to visit me in my office quite regularly. Once she brought me an apple from the fruit stand on the corner— Hans Hueber chuckled aloud—and I wondered briefly if she had read someplace that apples are the thing to give a teacher. She told me she wanted to major in English. I didn't think she would do well, but I didn't tell her so. Whenever Hans Hueber was not in the office, our conversations turned to other things: I asked her what high school had been like for her, & what brought her to this particular university. She was footing her tuition bill herself. I once asked her why she had not chosen to go someplace closer to her home, & she looked at me incredulously & said that she couldn't have imagined going anyplace else. It was in the city, she said. By the "city" she meant, exclusively, Manhattan, which she worshipped & fetishized as the physical manifestation of every fulfilled dream. Furthermore, she said, she couldn't possibly have gone anyplace with anyone she knew from high school. This I understood; I too had had a miserable experience in high school.

It was during these conversations that I came to believe she was similar to me in many ways, & also that I had something to offer her. That I could help her in some way. The semester ended & I watched her walk out of my classroom after our final class and I felt a deep and abiding fear come over me that I would never see her again.

But shortly after classes were over, in late December, I received my first letter from her. It was written out by hand —she had typed, on a typewriter, all her other papers for me; I'd never seen her handwriting before—and addressed to my office at the university. For the first time she called me "Arthur" instead of "Professor Opp." It seemed like a

conscious and strenuous decision. She said to me, *Dear Arthur, This is Charlene Turner. Thank you for your class, the best class I've ever taken*. (She had not taken any other college classes and, as far as I know, never did again.) She told me about books she was reading & things she was thinking about. Movies she'd seen. She signed it, *Fondly, Charlene Turner*.

I read it twice. & then I read it three more times. I had never in all my life received such a letter. I tucked the letter into my shirt pocket. I carried it around with me all day like a good-luck charm. I brought it home with me on the subway & read it again when I got home. & before I went to bed I sat down at my dining room table to write a reply—the first of the hundreds of letters to Charlene that I would write in my lifetime.

After a few exchanges, I told Marty Stein, who was my dearest friend until her death in 1997. Marty I met as a graduate student at Columbia. She was a year ahead of me, perpetually hunched over, scurrying from place to place like a mouse in glasses. It was Marty—expert on the work of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf; willfully and perhaps exaggeratedly ignorant about much of the rest of the canon—who got me a job at the college that became my home for nearly two decades. In return, it was I who convinced her to move to Brooklyn in the fall of 1979. I got her an apartment on the top floor of the brownstone next to mine, & together, platonically, we whiled away hours & hours at school & at home.

Partly I told her to make it feel real. I told Marty everything. She was drinking tea on my couch. I said, "One of my students is writing to me."

Marty looked at me. "A woman?" she said. Marty would never have used the word *girl*, though that's what Charlene was: a girl, O very girlish.

I said yes.

“What’s she saying?” asked Marty.

“Anything she wants to,” I said.

“Have you written back?”

“Yes.”

“How many times?”

I paused. “Five times,” I said.

“She’s written to you five times, and you’ve written to her five times,” said Marty.

“Approximately.”

“Do you love her?”

“Probably,” I said. I felt hopeless and desperate. Marty put her tea on the table so that she could throw her hands into the air and let them fall on either side of her.

She thought my friendship with Charlene was ridiculous. She thought it smacked of patriarchy. “How *old* is she?” she asked me, & I told her truthfully that I did not know. I thought at first that she was in her twenties. I was thirty-nine at the time. But I came to find out that she was even younger than I’d figured. Nineteen at the time of our meeting. Twenty the last time I saw her.

Eventually she suggested, again by letter, that we meet outside of school. It was February. She hadn’t been my student for two months. Still, it was especially brave of her & I could sense the bravery in her penmanship, darker than usual, more deliberate & neat. I chose the place in my reply. It was a café near Gramercy Park. Far enough from the university, I thought, so that I didn’t worry about being seen by a colleague; near enough so I could get there quickly after class.

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I have to admit that it was an exploitative choice: it was a perfect little shop. Dimly glowing inside, little flowers on the tables, white lights where the wall met the ceiling. The

reassuring smell of a fireplace. I arrived before she did & sat with a book that I looked at but did not read. The door, hung with bells, made a noise as it opened and there she was, Charlene Turner, wearing a purple down coat that came to her ankles. It was very cold outside.

Although in her letter she had used my first name, now she reverted to *Professor Opp*, and I made a lousy senseless joke. “Dr,” I said, & she got very embarrassed and said, “Doctor, Doctor.”

“I’m joking,” I said, but it was too late, & even after I implored her to call me by my first name, she mainly avoided addressing me directly.

At first we had not much to say to one another. She looked around the shop jerkily, her head as quick as a sparrow’s, her eyes moving in circles. But later she seemed calm enough to look around her at least a little bit, & I saw it having its effect on her: the charming cosmopolitan place, three Frenchwomen in a corner, two Russians at the bar.

She told me about her childhood, about her hopes for the future.

She told me several things about herself that I have never forgotten.

She wanted it all. The shop & the city & the Russians. She wanted no longer to be lonely.

In the end it was this feeling that drew us toward each other & that kept us there. I sensed her loneliness the moment she walked into my classroom, & I thought it likely that she could sense mine, although I tried to shield her from it. Neither of us had much in the way of family. She confessed to me that her parents didn’t even know she had taken a class in the city; they would have thought it was a waste of money. She confessed to me that she was unable to continue her education at the university, for the time being, because she could no longer afford it. & again I had

an urge, as I always do with people I like or love, to take care of her: to—simply—give her what she needed. Anything her heart desired. But I would have felt foolish & presumptuous offering her anything, so I didn't, & I have spent many years wondering if perhaps I should have.

We spent hours together talking. I took her to see things I believed she would find interesting: plays & concerts & cultural events of the sort that New York City is famous for. I took her to several of my favorite restaurants. One evening, toward the end of spring, we ventured over to the pier at Christopher Street & threw pieces of a soft pretzel to some ducks that had congregated nearby, & she bent forward toward the water, one hand on her knee, the other held out eagerly toward the birds. This image of Charlene Turner has become fixed in my mind forever: it is how I think of her even now, her hair pulled back, wearing a drab brown coat that was very unlike the bright clothes beneath it. When the birds swam toward her and accepted her gift, she raised a hand as if in victory, & turned to me smiling. I watched her. She was dear to me.

Nevertheless, that spring I felt slightly unnatural: this was not any Arthur Opp I knew, taking someone out on dates, planning & executing gallant little excursions here & there. Always I was waiting for the bottom to drop out of things, for Charlene Turner to stop returning my telephone calls & letters.

So when she did stop returning my telephone calls, I was almost relieved. & when she continued to return my letters, I was gratified & happy. In May I received a note from her that said she was having some family trouble & would not be able to see me for a while. She was very sorry, she said, & very sad, & she would miss me.

When I responded, saying I understood & I wished her well, I assumed it would be our last exchange. But she kept writing to me. For years & years she wrote to me.

What she could not have known, & what I decided, after some deliberation, not to tell her, was that our brief relationship had several serious consequences for me.

I never felt the need to be furtive about our friendship, & so once or twice we were seen by my colleagues when Charlene met me at the end of a school day, & I would smile at them obliviously, & say hello. Another time, while out with Charlene for a Saturday dinner in a nice midtown restaurant, I saw the dean of Arts & Sciences, & said hello to her, & introduced her to Charlene by name. Certainly the thought had crossed my mind that what we were doing might be—frowned upon, in some vague way, but in general my relationship with Charlene felt so innocent, so lovely, that it was hard to imagine that anyone would sanction me for it. Besides, I told myself, Charlene was no longer my student, nor even a student at the university itself.

Therefore I was very surprised to be rung up in my office one afternoon by the dean, who asked me if I could come by. This was at the very end of spring semester, after Charlene had already announced to me, by letter, that she would be unable to continue to see me. I thought perhaps I had forgotten to do something—it was my weakness as a professor. I was constantly forgetting meetings, forgetting paperwork, forgetting compliance with one initiative or another.

I rumbled into the dean's office & sat down across the desk from her, expecting to be asked for a favor, or to be scolded for some small item or other. But she did not engage in small talk.

"There has been some discussion," said the dean, "about you and a student."

She paused and looked at me for a moment as if trying to determine my innocence or guilt by the look on my face.

Which must only have registered as surprise—truly, I was so surprised that I couldn't even speak. I opened my mouth and closed it again.

“Are you currently having a relationship with a student?” she asked me. She was attempting to be courteous, professional. She asked me the question as if she were a doctor.

“No, I am not,” I said. It was the truth.

“Were you,” said the dean, consulting some papers before her as if they pertained to our conversation, “with a young woman named Charlene Turner at Franco’s when I saw you there earlier this spring? Was that Ms. Turner?”

“Yes,” I said. “But Charlene Turner isn’t a student here anymore.”

“She is indeed,” said the dean, and proffered to me the paper she had been holding in her hands, which, as it turned out—did pertain. It was Charlene Turner’s transcript. On it was a course from that spring, Modern Literature, which I had recommended to her specifically at the end of fall semester, but which I thought she had dropped.

“She hasn’t been attending,” I said.

“I believe that’s beside the point,” said the dean. “As you’re aware, it violates the university’s code of ethics for a professor to be engaged in a romantic relationship with a student— especially a student whom he or she has taught.”

“Who made the complaint?” I asked her. I’m not sure why I did, knowing that she would not answer. It came out of me unstoppably. I had my suspicions. Hans Hueber’s face popped into my head.

Of course she would not answer. She told me that it was her duty, since the situation had been brought to her attention, to report it to the university’s ethics board. The ethics board, consisting of five of my colleagues, two administrators, and three elected students, would then determine whether a hearing was necessary.

Needless to say I was quite upset. My relationship with teaching was fraught, it is fair to say, but in general I loved

it dearly. Nothing touched my heart so much as a student who seemed genuinely to have learned something from me, & nothing made me feel so connected to the world as being the vessel through which someone else's discoveries, or philosophy, or art, poured into another human being.

I went home that evening & had a good cry, a thing that in general I rarely allow myself to do. I called my friend Marty Stein over when it became too much to bear on my own. She came into my house & I began to tell her about the terrible injustice that had befallen me. But from the look on her face it seemed she already knew, which she confirmed upon my asking.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked her.

She was wearing a capelike garment and she clutched it tighter and tighter about herself.

"I didn't want to upset you unnecessarily," she said.

"But now I am very upset," I said.

"I know you are," said Marty. "I'm sorry."

She told me that she thought maybe nothing would come of it, but you know how gossip works, she said. She said she thought maybe the story had been blown out of proportion, or certain falsehoods had been added to it.

"The rumor is," said Marty, "that you began seeing her while she was still your student."

"Utterly untrue," I said, & Marty told me she believed me, of course, & that she had attempted to correct anyone who repeated it to her, without, of course, letting on that she knew anything at all. "We'll fix it," Marty said. "Don't worry." She made me feel much better that evening, & by its end even had me convinced that maybe there would be no hearing at all, & that over the summer everyone would forget about it, & so forth.

So when, the following week, I received a letter notifying me that I was to appear before the ethics board, I was quite thoroughly disheartened.

The semester was drawing to a close by then. I had a batch of final papers come in, forty in sum, and I brought them home and put them on my dining room table and looked at them every time I passed. I sat down with them several times but I could not concentrate. My mind would skip ahead to the hearing. The end-of-semester grading deadline came and went. I was certain that a pile of dunning letters was accumulating in my mailbox—from the registrar, from my department chair, perhaps from the dean—but I did not go into school to get them. One evening my phone began ringing and I let the message machine answer it. It was the dean, informing me that my grades were a week late, asking me to please call her as soon as possible.

I never did. On the morning of my hearing I pulled out my suit from my closet, the suit I very rarely had any occasion to wear, and laid it on my bed. I looked at it. I put it away.

I sat down in a chair, and looked at myself in the mirror that once sat atop my dresser, and knew in that moment that I would not return to the university, for I could not face them. O it was too humiliating.

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I never told Charlene Turner any of this. I did not fault her for it—I faulted myself, only—and I wanted her to remember our time together as fondly as I did. Like me, Charlene Turner never returned to school. If she did, she never mentioned it to me in the letters she continued to send me for many years. She had one semester of college & has since worked as a receptionist at various places. In her letters, she wrote to me mainly of her aspirations—to return to college, to move to the city & get a better job, one that paid more money—to buy a nice apartment in a nice part of town, to have several dogs. She complained to me about her co-workers & her parents & then when her