

Marc and Cathy Go to Grad School

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Mom was the first person in her family to go to college, and was almost the first to get a doctorate, if not for an evil administrator. But I was lucky enough to cross the doctoral finish line for the both of us...

My mother was the first member of her family to go to college, so it was a big surprise to her father when she wanted to go. "Why would you want to go to college?" he asked. "It's a breeding ground for degenerates."



He was probably referring to the drug, free love, and antiwar protest scene of the average 1960s era college campuses and he was, probably, worried that his daughter would get caught up in that scene. However, she told him firmly that she wanted to go and that was that. She loved literature and she wanted to study it, but she didn't want to move away from her family to get the degree, so she wouldn't be abandoning her roots. The argument was over, he supported her decision without any further protest, and she was off to college. Thanks to her high GPA and obvious financial need, she was granted a full scholarship to NYU, which provided her more than enough money to earn her BA, MA, go to

Italy, and come within striking distance of a doctorate in English. She loved the travel abroad, and she adored literature, especially the works by the Russian writers, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. She didn't much care for her 18th Century British Literature Professor, Bruno Muench, who had a tendency to read from yellowed notes and lecture the class. He was also persnickety about proper footnote and bibliography formatting.

Mom may well have managed to race across the academic finish line and get her doctorate if not for two major obstacles. When she was in her second year of her bachelor's degree, her mother died suddenly. She never fully recovered from the loss. At the wake, she was inconsolable, but her maternal grandmother and her aunt did their best to cheer her up. Her grandmother said, "It is a shame, Cathy, that your mother died so young. If only you hadn't gone to college. That might have changed things." Mom's aunt nodded in sagely agreement. After all, it was an old, Southern Italian superstition that there was a finite amount of good luck in the world, and any time good fortune comes – say, in the form of a college scholarship – that windfall would use up some of the good will of the Fates, and something bad was bound to happen – say, the death of a parent.

This was not the kind of encouragement that would have spurred her on to the bitter end to get a doctorate.

The second major obstacle was me. Shortly after she married my father, she found out that she was pregnant with me. (In fact, she was already pregnant on her honeymoon in Disney World and didn't know it, or she might not have gone on

Space Mountain so many times.) She had reached the stage in graduate school when she had finished all of her courses and it was time for her to read several hundred books to prepare for her comprehensive knowledge exams. Of course, she was an expectant mother who was working for peanuts teaching part-time at

Fordham University while her husband was making minimum wage in the mailroom of a law firm. So she went to the chair of the English Department and asked for a leave of absence, during which she can gradually read all the books on her reading list and still support her family.



The chair of the department said soberly, "You can rest when you are dead."

"Well, I'm not that tired," my mother replied. She then left the office and withdrew from the program.

However, she was fortunate enough to find full-time employment at a city university which, after a large shakeup that included a merger and the institution of the revolutionary multicultural policy of open enrollment, became New York City Technical College. She taught composition, remedial writing, and first-year literature courses there for more than twenty-five years.

Like my mother, I was interested in literature and teaching, but found myself taking an indirect, almost accidental path to getting a doctorate. Sadly, it was not through a scholarship. I had finished up my bachelor's degree at the State University of New York at SUNY Geneseo with a major in English and a minor in Medieval Italian Studies. (The minor was my way of studying my heritage and learning what it meant to be Italian besides liking pasta, opera, and the Rocky movies and chafing at the usual annoying Mafia stereotypes.) Taking somewhat after my Gothic-fiction-obsessed father, I wanted very much to be a novelist and my goal was to write the fourth best vampire novel ever written (after *Dracula*, *Carmilla*, and *I am Legend*), but the fourteen creative writing programs I applied to all rejected me. So I found myself moving back in with my parents, without a job, and with no clear career path. Mom was sympathetic. Very sympathetic. Up to a point. When she found herself doing my laundry as I slept until 10:30 every day, she decided it was time to take action. She said to me, "If you want to write, you should apply for a job as a reporter at *The Staten Island Advance*."

"A reporter?" I asked. "You want me to be a reporter? All they do is muckrake and make fun of Catholics and complain about the president. It's boring, depressing, and really politically biased."

"At least you'll be writing," she said.

"I can't be a reporter. I'm not a Democrat."



"At least you'll be writing."

"Bah," I said.

"Remember your job at McDonalds?"

"Yeah."

"Remember how you quit after just one day?"

"Yeah."

"So? If you're a reporter, at least you get to use your brain. You get to write."

"I dunno. I want to write fiction."

"Fine," she said. "Don't apply. Don't get a job. Continue staying up all hours of the night watching movies and sleeping 'til noon."

A month later, I was working at The Staten Island Advance.



But that is another story. (Until I have the opportunity to regale you with that one, I will reassure you that I liked reporters, and reporting, infinitely more than I expected to. And I found out that I was probably something of a Democrat after all...)

While I had given up on getting an MFA in Creative Writing, I had really enjoyed college, so I took weekend Master's degree classes at the local

College of

Staten Island. This was also at my mother's urging. The program was designed for High School teachers who needed thirty credits beyond their master's degrees to get a raise from the New York City Board of Education. It also serviced older men and women who liked to be part of book clubs who decided to enroll because they figured it would be like being in a book club, only they would have to write a ten-page paper to get grad school credit for it. I was kind of an anomaly. I was there to get an MA in English right after getting my BA, so I was the youngest student there. One of the first professors I met at CRC was a man named Dr. Bruno Muench, who had taught my mother decades earlier, but who had since given up his policy of reading his lessons off of yellowed notepaper.

Dr. Muench had a mischievous smile, a wiry build, and loved wearing boldly colored bow-ties. He loved teaching the graduate English courses because he felt that the older students were more serious than the younger ones, who were "just going to college because their parents forced them to." He did have an impatience for the high school teachers, who tended to be too worn out by teaching and family obligations to take the graduate work seriously. He also suspected that they were lazy and not all that smart since he didn't have much respect for Education majors. So it isn't surprising that he singled me out within a couple of weeks as one of the more enthusiastic contributors.

To make sure that the students did the reading each week, he assigned a one-page reaction paper to accompany the first four works, *Gulliver's Travels*, the Complete Poetry of Alexander Pope, *Candide*, and *Oronoko*. Before we began reading each book, he made it abundantly clear what he loved (Pope made him cry every time he read it) and what he had very little time for (he hated *Oronoko* and said that he only taught it because he needed to include a women novelist for politically correct reasons). When I began reading *Oronoko*, I kind of expected it to stink because Muench said that it stunk, but I found myself enjoying it. So, for my fourth reaction paper, I explained why I felt it was a good book and why it deserved to be taught. I was, in effect, strongly disagreeing with what he had just said in class. The lesson after he collected our reaction papers, he began by asking, "Okay, who's Marc?"

I wasn't sure why he was asking, so I sheepishly raised my hand. "Me."



Muench looked at me for a moment and then looked at the class. "Marc here is a true Franciscan. St. Francis said that the truly holy person can see God in everything. Marc is clearly someone who likes to find the positive in all he sees. Which is why he was able to find some merit in that dreadful book Oronoko." He looked at me again. "Good work."

Towards the end of the semester, Muench took me aside and told me that he had continued to enjoy my writings and that he felt I should go on to get my doctorate after I finished my Master's degree at the College of Staten Island.

"You're a reporter now, right?" Muench asked.

"Yes. I'm enjoying it."

"You should be a college teacher. It's your calling."

"Really? I would like to teach college. It is what my mother did, and my father has been teaching at a junior high for ten years now."

"So there's teaching in your blood."

"But I hear the job market for English teachers stinks."

"You'll get a job," Muench assured me.



"But the statistics are against it, aren't they?"

"Forget it. You'll get a job."

"Okay, but mom tells me that grad schools can be really unhelpful and make it difficult to finish up. Her friend John had a terrible time in the last leg of his studies because his advisor thought his dissertation was too liberal – too much 'new wave' literary theory and post-modernism – and wouldn't pass him. Of course, five years later, post-modernism was in vogue, but he'd already left grad school. And she didn't finish NYU because the chair of the department wouldn't give her a pregnancy leave."

Muench looked interested. "NYU? I taught at NYU. When was she at NYU?"

"She went to Italy in ... um ...1965? I think. Around then, I guess. I think."

Muench did some mental calculations. "Lawrence Blackstone was the chair. Sounds exactly like something he'd do. He had his moments, but nobody liked him much. Well, never mind. You wouldn't be happy at NYU anyway. They put obstacles in your way deliberately so that only the ones with no lives and no family and Asperger's Syndrome make it to graduation. I know exactly where you need to go."

"Where's that?"

"

Drew University. Taught there for a year. Friendly group of people. They actually mentor instead of



push their students away. And guess what? They teach fairy tale criticism there and have an expert in Gothic fiction and another expert in fairy tales. So you can study all that trash literature you love so much and continue being its greatest advocate."

"Um ... thanks," I said.

"And I'll write you a great recommendation and we'll be sure to get you a scholarship."

"Cool," I said.

"Just do me a favor," he said.

"What?"

"You like comic books, too, right?"

"Yes."

"You can advocate all you like for Gothic fiction, fairy tales, and even Oronoko. But please don't ever stomp for the value of teaching comic books in college. You'll water down the curriculum way too much."

"Okay," I said. "That sounds fair enough."



I was accepted into the Drew PhD program that fall, vowing that I would complete the PhD program, not just for myself, but for my mother, who was so cruelly treated so many years before.

In the end, I did get my doctorate.

And I never would have received it if not for my mother and Dr. Muench.

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