

## THE STUDENT UNION

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THE slightly plump, meticulously dressed young professor of Greek philosophy sat in the Student Union. It was his second month as an assistant professor at this State University—this monolith of free education—and he had discovered the coolest and most comfortable building on campus to be the Student Union, a building designed for student activities with student funds. The other buildings on campus were old, uncomfortably furnished, and poorly ventilated—all of which was distressing to the young professor because this October was one of the hottest on record, even for Southern California. He had taught his three classes this particular morning and rather than brave the Faculty Club again, with its damasked Victorian wallpaper and its Aubrey Beardsley reproductions, he decided to have lunch in the Student Union; at least he could sit there unnoticed and eat his lunch in relative quiet.

Professor Strickland—a Ph.D. in his early thirties, and still single—was teaching in a university for the first time since graduating from Harvard three years before. During the previous three years he had been in Europe, spending one year in Paris on a Fulbright, another year in Florence on a Guggenheim, and the last year, the one previous to this one, in Rome, penuriously, on what was left over from the preceding two. Thus he felt a little out of touch with American universities and with teaching in general. Most of all he felt estranged from the young people he was expected to lecture to, interestingly and intelligently, nine hours a week—the “new generation, the NOW generation,” as the prophets of ersatz culture were fond of calling them. While in Europe he had read everything there was to read about student demonstrations and teach-ins on American campuses. He had followed closely the change in student slogans from the nonchalant ultimatums of a few years before, when photographs in *Life* of pretty co-eds with signs reading “Make love, not war” sullied just a little the image American parenthood had of its young. The new slogans suggested to the professor another degree of moral relaxation altogether. And while in Italy he had read at least one enlivened story about the



"new morality" in the American university, researched sensationally by the Italian scandal-sheet *ABC*.

Professor Strickland had not known what to expect when he returned to the States to take a teaching position. He noticed almost immediately that the students were restless. His students came to class reluctantly—which may have been his fault, he realized—they could hardly wait to escape to the Student Union, to do . . . he did not know what (he never actually saw any of his students when he went there for lunch). Even the clothes the students wore were strikingly different from the conservative, ivy-league fashions prominent on campuses a few years before when he was a student. The new fashions more than anything else suggested an upheaval of taste and morality. The girls were seeking a different sexual identity in their dress and hair styles—resembling young boys in their close haircuts, their skin-tight sailor trousers and heavy, breast-flattening jackets; while the boys appeared to be seeking a femininity which had been lacking in male attire for over a century—wearing their hair long, and dressing in wild paisley shirts and tight elasticized pants, clothes that depicted the erotic fantasies of their creators. Professor Strickland felt a little out of place in the Norman Hilton tropical suit he had picked up in New York, with the advance the university had sent him.

This particular noon-hour Professor Strickland sat in one of the cafeterias of the Student Union. All the rooms were pretentiously designed according to a vague classical motif. The room he sat in was Roman, and very poorly done—with numerous fake Greco-Roman columns, simulated marble tables and benches, and, in one corner, an artificial olive tree with glistening plastic olives. The entire room was one heinous esemplastic attempt to capture antiquity. He had finished lunch and was watching a young couple at the next table. The girl was blond and pretty. Most of the co-eds at this university were blond and seared a cocoa-brown by a lifetime's devotion to the Pacific sun. The professor tried to watch the girl unobtrusively, for he was attracted to her, as he was now to American women in general, whom he rediscovered to be very beautiful, making him wonder why he believed for two years French women were the world's most attractive. But the young girl he was watching was unmoved by his subtle attentions, and in his heart Strickland knew that nothing could ever draw her away from the All-American who sat beside her, facing the other way, downing his third glass of milk. Undaunted, the professor continued





to examine her beauty from a distance, concentrating on her cream-white lips, a creation no doubt of Quant or Factor, which surrounded a mouthful of even whiter teeth. The latter gave off small explosions of incandescent whiteness whenever she laughed, which she did occasionally to punctuate the severe attention she was paying All-American at her side. It was—the professor mused to himself—an infinitely kissable, and yes, sanitary! mouth; the unreal kind of mouth one is accustomed to seeing in the slickest American fashion ads. He heard her speak at the end of one of her laughs, and her voice was husky, with the quality of perhaps eighteen years' intense living behind it. And what she said was, "Could you eat it?" Suddenly the fellow turned and gave Strickland a dirty look.

The girl was fingering a limp, greasy french-fry which she had just lifted from her plate like something dead and already decaying, and which she was offering to her male friend for consideration. Apparently her eyes had informed him someone at the next table was watching her, and he had reacted the only way he knew how—athletically—moving his weight awkwardly on the fake marble bench, and trying to rebuke Strickland with the peculiar ruthless stare of an adolescent sure of his sexual prerogatives.

A little flushed, Strickland finished his coffee, picked up the paper-back he had brought with him, and left the Roman Room. At the end of the hallway he saw a line of men teachers (none of whom he recognized) forming outside rooms numbered simply: One, Two. Co-eds in ethereal two-piece swimsuits were collecting something as the teachers entered one or the other of these rooms. No one noticed Strickland as he walked by. A faint antiseptic smell drifted on a draft of cool air from the rooms.

A co-ed came up to him as he continued along the hallway and handed him a petition to sign. He demurred with a smile. He did not notice the writing on the paper, only that the girl's body standing before him was considerably smaller than his own. She wore a bikini, which appeared on closer inspection to be nothing more than three handkerchiefs. Her breasts barely filled the makeshift brassiere, and hung like loose fruit in small cotton bags. Her breath was aromatic when she spoke, when she said: "Wouldn't you like to take off your jacket? You look awfully hot."

"No thank you," he said. "I'm really quite cool." Whereupon he noticed the ridiculousness of his comment in a group of laughing



youths who came through one of the doorways, *half-naked*. They had towels around their waists but wore nothing else. He felt unclean in their presence and sought a long corridor off the main hallway, a corridor with a sign over it which read: BATHS.

Then, unexpectedly, and without comment, a tall naked boy was leading him through a labyrinth of rough concrete tunnels to one of a series of rooms—concrete cubicles actually, walled on their fronts with glass.

"You can use this dressing room," the boy said. "The baths are down this way."

Just then a number of young men and women walked by toward the baths, naked, except for towels draped over their shoulders. Strickland marvelled at how relaxed they were in their nudity. He felt uncomfortable in their presence, and waves of heat and perspiration began to gather under his clothes. He left the glass-fronted cubicle and began to walk down the corridor—trying to seem as nonchalant as possible, his jacket in his arms now, the sleeves of his striped Hathaway shirt rolled. There were numerous dressing rooms along the corridor each with a glass front and glass door. Most of these were occupied, and he noticed, without appearing to examine the compartments too carefully, and without revealing his own amazement, that the students inside were either stark naked or in the process of undressing. Still no one seemed aware of his presence.

Strickland heard the resonant shouts and echoes of students and the sounds of splashing water down the hallway, and he continued in this direction, his nostrils burning with chlorine, until he stood on the threshold of a huge white-tiled room in the center of which was an Olympic pool, surrounded by four smaller pools, their water steaming as though very hot. Naked young men and women would jump into these pools, swim vigorously a few minutes, then scurry out and dive immediately into the larger and obviously tepid pool. Their bodies were red and shaking with the heat when they pulled themselves out of the smaller pools.

Strickland felt conspicuous watching the students—and so, noticing an empty cubicle at the end of the corridor, he slipped inside. He loosened his shirt and pretended to undress, as a group of young men strolled by in the corridor. Again he was amazed at the absence of inquisitiveness in their eyes and movements, as though they had lived together naked all their lives. There was an *unhealthy* absence of



curiosity in their faces, he decided—experiencing his own curiosity as a species of fever in which no one else participated but himself. He experienced something else as well—and he paused an instant to question this *other* feeling, the feeling that was urging him to undress . . . only to dismiss speculation altogether and submit, unabashedly, to the temptation that moved through his body. He began to undress slowly, watching the activity in the hall as he did so.

There were no hangers to hang clothes on—simply a large enamel bin marked: Clothes. He carefully placed his new suit and shirt around the edge of the bin, where they hung, limpidly, like detached pieces of his former self. Undressing, item by item, he became conscious of his ugly, flaccid whiteness, then embarrassed, as another group of well-built, cycladic youths walked by his cubicle. If only they recognized his intricate weakness of flesh he would at least feel he existed. Before he departed for Europe he was able to be physically at ease in front of students only when meticulously dressed in English herringbone or fine hopsack—and to his eyes students had always looked an ill sight in their makeshift smocks, their sewn stockings, their old twisted shoes, clothes that looked as if they belonged to ancient times. Now the situation was reversed, and it was he who looked out of place, poorly dressed in his nakedness, and the students who looked sleek and clean and remarkably healthy, their long hair not an attachment any longer, not a social protest, but a necessary appropriation. He was beside himself in embarrassment, seeking a mirror or any reflective surface (the glass was totally transparent and without glare) to find the confirmation he needed of his decrepit state, in order, perhaps, to feel he could then *do* something about it. There were no mirrors, however, so he looked himself over as best he could. The deep olive stain of the Italian sun on his arms made the rest of his body resemble the sickly color of skin which has been compressed and drained white under a band-aid. He envisioned his partially bald head glowing red on the albuminous stalk of his body—and for an instant, as he looked at his new summer suit, its ten ounces draped like a rag over the edge of the sanitized bin, he wondered what power kept him from dressing immediately and leaving. Some venal instinct stopped him; the promise of some secret, almost feverish joy moved with the heat of the marble floor through his feet and up into the sensuous vessel of his body. It was as if this was what he had always wanted: to display himself naked before his students, to get even with the over-ripe co-eds who





sat at the front of his class with eyes lowered, giving their real selves away, their unconscious selves (for he had always held man's unconscious lay in the body itself, in the *physical* self, rather than in the mind), in the way they crossed their legs tightly in front of him, so tightly in fact that he found himself visibly taking time out from his lectures to ascertain the fact that they indeed had nothing on under their lycra shorts. He could get even now with their uncontrolled coyness, their pubescent desire to reveal their bodies for interminable, visual caresses . . .

Instantly, Strickland's secret happy acceptance of his nakedness left him. Just as he was leaving the cubicle he saw one of his students walking down the passageway from the baths. Strickland turned abruptly in distress and went back inside the cubicle. It was no use. There was only a sheet of glass between himself and the boy. He stood behind the bin and fumbled nervously with his clothes in an attempt to appear occupied, hoping in fact to disappear altogether. He managed to dislocate the paperback book from his jacket pocket just as he heard a tapping on the glass. The student was smiling at him, benightedly, a terrible sophomoric, glass smile. The professor stood erect, holding the Harper Torchbook on Plato where it would serve most advantageously to mitigate his embarrassment. The student was one of his worst—an unfortunate fellow, devoid of intelligence, taste, background; an heir to that physical sluggishness which kept the fires of war burning smoothly.

The boy entered the cubicle uninvited. Strickland was appalled at such audacity. Usually he managed to avoid belaboring students, but he was helpless now; what could he do? The fellow was standing in front of him breathing deeply and earnestly, beads of water sparkling like scales over his flesh. Strickland never noticed before how tall and muscular the boy was. His naked hulk was enormous, protruding here and there in mounds and triangles of tightened, threatening muscle, his chest and nether regions a blaze of feudal hair. The fellow smelled strongly of soap; it was a pungent scent, neither floral nor synthetic—the smell of wild vegetable. Strickland was completely ill at ease until the fellow spoke. He was then able to reassert his posture partly, for the boy was full of the most gauche salutations that his worst students kept in store for him. Strickland managed a fairly assertive reply.

"Yes . . . well I never imagined it was like *this*! It's a wonder anyone comes to class."



"You get used to it professor. In fact it stimulates thought. It stim . . ."

"Yes well . . ."

"We run things differently in here professor. But you understand not everybody has such tastes—you know what I mean—so we leave things the way they are outside." The student laughed.

"Yes, I suppose."

"Have you seen the faculty quarters professor?"

"No. I just arrived."

"Ah! You must, you must. Real strange. Yeah. Real strange. I was in there once."

"You mean the faculty has a place in this. . . . Here?"

"Ha. Ha. Yeah sure. They didn't want to be left out, so we gave them half the basement."

"The base . . . ?"

"Yeah. Real ring-a-ding spot they got. I'll take you there. Come on."

Strickland felt uncomfortable walking beside this tenth-of-a-ton athlete. He realized now why he had disliked the boy from the start: it was his visible, nearly-naked strength bursting for exposure.

"It's this way professor."

As Strickland hurried along beside the youth he was careful to walk on the inside wall, that he might avoid other students. This did little to circumvent embarrassment, however, because there were groups of naked students gathered outside many of the dressing rooms. Strickland clung tightly to his paperback book as though it might become at any instant an item of possible habiliment and thus be stretched to blanket his nakedness. He fumbled in each of his attempts at composure—at trying to straighten his carriage, to inhale his sagging midriff, to distend imaginatively the flimsy calves of his legs. His hands took turns fondling the paperback on Plato, while the fingers of the other wove nervously through his hair, as if this one gesture of grooming could justify, if not in fact hide, his embarrassment. Oh how he tried!

He encountered faces he had seen before—faces he had been drawn to and faces he had been repelled by—and the naked bodies of those he had seen before on campus, and had been attracted to, now fulfilled the promise they seemed to have made whenever he caught sight of them fully clothed in the musty corridors of the humanity buildings: Buildings One, Two and Four. And the academic part of him which





was continually at work taking notes realized something momentarily: that his eyes were adjusting to the panorama of nakedness before him, as if he were seeing something he had seen all along, something he had imagined all along, confirming for him another of his theories about life, that reality brings with it nothing really new, nothing that has not already been experienced or prepared for by the imagination.

After they walked past the students and entered a long, white-tiled corridor, Strickland asked the youth (who was by this time lost in some kind of athletic reverie):

"Who began all this?"

The student removed himself from his thought with an abrupt physical movement. Strickland imagined it was the kind of movement the boy would make when he broke his direction in football and ran sideways to catch the ball.

"Who began it? Oh two years ago we had a general poll for the kind of union the students wanted. And someone got the idea to put the results—the suggestions and all, you know—into a computer. We did and the computer drew up plans for the whole thing. Neat eh? We were surprised but no one complained."

The student laughed, a small laugh as pinched as his voice, then he spoke again. "It isn't such a bad idea is it professor? It's a little like ancient times—you know—the stuff you talk about in your class."

"What! The Athenians? Well, I wouldn't say that. Your union is quite extraordinary though. An idea gleaned from the collective unconscious by a computer. Amazing."

"Glad you like the set-up professor."

"Does the thing ever get out of hand?"

"Hell no. It runs itself. Nothing to it. We all pay fees and it runs itself. Everybody serves on some committee or other and helps the organizational problems, you know what I mean."

His huge naked body again attempted a large laugh, but only a dead catarrh came forth. The student nodded to some friends—three girls and a boy who were coming out of one of the rooms.

"Some of the guys really come into their own here. We have to chase them out at midnight or they'd live here."

"There must be problems," Strickland said.

"Naw. Everyone behaves all right. These help a lot. The computer drew up these too."



Strickland noticed for the first time small cards in glass frames on the walls; the writing on these cards was computerese:

WHY REBEL WHEN YOU HAVE THIS?  
RAPP IT ROUND YOU  
THIS IS ALL YOURS KEEP IT CLEAN SHOWER REGULARLY  
WE EVICT THOSE WHO DESTROY!  
DO NOT ENFORCE THIS WAY OF LIFE ON THOSE NOT YET

A larger sign stared at the professor from a walnut door:

FACULTY LOUNGE

below which someone had added a couple of plastic stickers which read:

FACULTY RE-CREATION  
PLEASE STAY OFF THE GRASS

The youth smiled and patted Strickland on the back several times, an experience which, to the professor, was like having his bones numbered individually.

"You're on your own now professor. If you want a tour of the rest of the building let me know. You haven't seen it all by any means. The more intimate rooms are downstairs. Just ask for me at the main desk. I'm around most of the time. I'll leave you here. I don't know everything that goes on inside here (he pointed to the word "re-creation"). They keep it pretty secret." He laughed and backed away. "So long professor."

When he opened the door Professor Strickland saw a long slightly dark corridor at the end of which was a closed wooden door. The architectural design was basically the same as in the student section except the glass was replaced by poured concrete walls and walnut doors; the contents of the rooms which lined the corridor were obviously secret. Now that he was alone, the opulence of the building amazed Strickland and satisfied his love of the classic line in architecture. The floor was genuine white marble, and heated, sending a throbbing warmth through his flesh. The walls were a perfect complement of rough concrete and brushed stainless steel, the pattern broken tastefully in places by a naturally finished walnut beam which grew



out of the concrete like a tree from a cliff; while the whole was lighted indirectly as though by sources of radium concealed within the walls.

As he crept silently along the corridor Strickland began to regain his confidence; and with the return of self-confidence came also a kind of erotic satisfaction which swelled through him—possible now because of the absence of the strapping naked youths, or because of the inscrutable concrete walls, walls that might well harbour the most extraordinary trysts of the flesh. He stood still a moment, examining the line of closed doors, expecting a voice to erupt from the porous walls, a voice soft and sensuous like the voice of unidentifiable airline stewardesses, telling him in high fidelity that he was at last in the deepest recesses of his unconscious and that he could expect his wildest sexual fantasies to burst upon him at any instant, from behind closed doors.

Suddenly, unconsciously, he opened one of the doors. He was shocked at what he saw. The room was suffused with steam yet plainly visible in its center was a marble table, very much like a catafalque, upholding a huge mass of exhausted human flesh, from every appearance a rotund middle-aged man, a dean or administrator surely, upon whom a naked boy was performing what looked to Strickland like a ritual switching. The lifeless figure did not seem to respond in any way to the slight but obvious sting of the switch, nor did the figure turn to see who had opened the door. The small boy turned to look but did not falter in the repetitious and uninvolved lowering of his utensil across the body on the table; this utensil appeared to be an imitation palm, undoubtedly made of plastic.

Strickland closed the door softly. A dismal thought moved downward through his body, but he dismissed this as the bad thought it in fact was.

He walked toward the large door at the end of the corridor. When he opened it he was showered with a dozen intense gazes. The room was full of naked faculty members. They stopped talking a moment—then, recognizing an older member, resumed their conversations. Immediately, a friendly hand—an all too friendly hand, Strickland thought—was upon his shoulder, leading him around the room. He was introduced first to a professor of art, who stood, or rather posed, *contrapposto*, against a marble pillar, like one of Michelangelo's indifferently tortured *ignudi*. He met a young professor of psychology who was crouched in a chair with his legs apart—smelling and plucking,





petal by petal, a large red flower that gave the illusion of growing from between his thighs. In a corner he met a professor of literature who talked excitedly about death and resurrection in something or other . . . and the professor frowned and scratched himself nervously as he talked. The fellow who led Strickland around and introduced him to these people—none of whom Strickland had seen before on campus—was a lawyer. He was short and stocky, and embraced the various individuals forensically, interrupting whatever it was they were doing, as he drew Strickland close and said: "This is the new assistant in the philosophy department. He came through the student entrance. Didn't you Professor Strickland? What did you think, eh? We have our own entrance around the side." Then he laughed roundly.

An anthropologist was curled up on the floor, his legs twined together beneath him into a cushion, his naked body grossly tattooed, mottled with color like some strange creature's egg, blue, green, ochre, and as Strickland drew closer he saw that the fellow was in a trance, lost in the grey skein of whatever it was he was smoking; and Strickland saw too that there were welts beneath the stains of vegetable color on the man's body—markings no doubt of a clandestine, self-punitive sect.

In another corner, the darkest corner, a group of political scientists were gesticulating—Strickland thought—quite obscenely. He declined the lawyer's invitation to go over and meet the members individually.

For an instant, as Strickland regarded the naked menagerie before him, he was reminded of Bosch's great panel on the Garden of Delights, and the secretive, alimentary rites depicted therein. He did not like what he saw. He was growing a bit faint looking at all this aged, discolored flesh. The faculty quarters were so different from the student part of the building, where, if there was nothing else to recommend it, there was a certain cleanliness and openness of behavior. He was confused he saw no one he knew or recognized. He wondered if perhaps the whole thing were not an elaborate figment of his sexually starved imagination. He wanted to leave. He had the horrible feeling everyone was looking at him, that the experienced eyes were digging into his flesh and laughing. He clutched his Plato more securely, thanked the lawyer, excused himself.

He hurried down the corridor toward the student part of the building, passing, with a shudder, the closed door of the room where he had seen the boy switching the administrator. He opened the door



which took him once again into a world of youths dressing and undressing behind invisible walls. At last he located his cubicle and his clothes. He dressed quickly and made his way back to the main part of the building.

Only now, when he was fully dressed, did he attract the attention of students. His eyes flared back at their tentatively curious, yet still fundamentally disinterested faces. He was angry now and his anger sought audible expression; he wanted to shout at everyone he saw, "You are worse hypocrites than we are! You parade your nakedness as though it's a right. You are a bunch of surfeited, selfish . . ." but he could not word his anger as trenchantly as he thought, even to himself. What was it he wanted to say? What was it he felt about the two modes of existence he had witnessed?—the glass world of adolescent indifference, the subterranean world of . . . of interminable adult curiosity. He was snared in the resulting tension, the unresolvable tension they brought into his dull, tranquil life. He desired the freedom these adolescents had (freedom he had never known, to say the least), yet he despised their ineffectuality . . . and yes! it was coming to him, he could articulate now what it was he despised most in them, and this perhaps because it was what he envied most in them: their utter satiety, their sexual satiety! They were, as a generation, so adequately fulfilled that indifference rather than desire shifted dismally across their dulled children's eyes. A wave of regret and despair washed through him as he caught the deadened response of a few eyes. No one offered to speak to him, to smile, to get involved. They were their own sect—as impenetrable, as unknowable, as their psychedelic intimacies. One young couple saw him coming and the young man, in order to move the girl out of Strickland's way, slipped his hand behind her, on her backside, to lead her aside. The girl curtsied slightly and moved out of Strickland's way, indifferent to the indifferent hand behind her. The professor felt something give way inside his stomach, the sensation that he was about to lose a part of himself. His anger became *loneliness* then as he realized another truth about these young people and about himself: they experienced none of his futile anguish over human nature; no *angst* lay at the soft center of their being. They were fulfilled, so happily fulfilled that neither their bodies nor their minds need ever strive ardently for knowledge or experience beyond them.

In the Student Union proper, confronting once again students who





were fully clothed, he tried one last time to arrest individual attention with his eyes, especially the attention of young girls, in a last effort to join them, to communicate with them a little. But no one noticed. No eyes returned to him in gentleness or tenderness even the most superficial regards. The professor stopped what had become almost a run and walked normally to the main door of the building. Already, down the hallway, he could see blue sky . . .

Outside, while walking past a girls' residence, he noticed a student of his coming down the steps to meet a boy who was shifting about in a clump of bushes, obviously waiting for her. The girl's face was fluorescent with makeup—her freshly coated lips a fantastic glutinous pink. As she descended she licked her lips a few times to feel if the paint was dry. The boy in the bushes was smelling his fingers.

Professor Strickland knew, sadly, he was back in the real world, the only world he would perhaps ever understand.

