

SCHADENFREUDE IN THE RACIST PARK

KAY SEXTON

If she chose, Eva could leave her dwelling and climb the steppes to stare out over the lights of Beijing, shrouded in smog. But she didn't choose—it was months since she'd left the park at all. She ate food left by tourists and crops grown in the park. She walked down to the small, slow-running, universal river and picked gourds from the Xuan. Or she chose the middle ground of the Jing and roasted their corn-cobs over a fire. The water was not safe to drink—signs above every tap showed crossed red lines—but visitors abandoned half-full bottles of water and soft drinks. As long as she didn't think about whose lips had drunk before hers, she was okay.

For the first few nights, as she'd burrowed into a mound of abandoned and unidentifiable textiles, she invented dialogues. In the hours of plangent noise—night bird calls, car horns and odd hammerings—she debated with Eric, argued with former friends, defended herself to colleagues whose quirks and vices she and Eric had ridiculed. But she knew there was no defence. Her action, and inaction, had flayed people alive and she'd run away as soon as she understood that. Even the conversations with Eric—Eric the Head, Eric the Dead—ceased.

She'd thought China would be far enough away, but somehow they'd tracked her down. She'd come back one day to find a message on the answering machine: 'Miss Clements? Eva Clements? I'm calling from the *Oakville Examiner*. We'd like to have your comments on *The Manifesto of Mendacity*, recently published by the Sanderson Press. We understand you are the uh ... illustrator of Professor Dayster's uh ... text. You know, it's caused quite a stir in Oakville, Miss Clements ...' She'd wiped the tape.

Everything had stopped with Eric's death, and begun again when the video cassette arrived. She'd been lost—denying he could be gone, or at least denying he could be entirely gone, insisting on some remnant, some psychic or emotional *memento mori*. The padded envelope with Eric's lawyer's address in the top corner had pulled her out of her stupor into a hard-edged panic. She hadn't been expecting a video. Even though it was only a week since Eric's death, not nearly enough time, what she'd expected to find in the envelope was 'the book'.

It had begun as a joke, a bitter, brilliant invective against a university that had turned Politics into International Relations and Feminism into Gender Theory. Eric, feared and emulated, a political theorist at the centre of the terrorism debate, was emasculated by the departmental name change. His diatribe began as late evening conversations—wine-fuelled, using whatever dregs of passion were left from their love-making. Eva, feminist reduced to gender theorist, encouraged him. She loved it, loved him, and hearing her lover, this clever, galled man, dissect his colleagues, the university administration, the down-sliding educational principles of the nation, was as good as sex. One night, as they'd sprawled on his couch, smoking dope and tangling their legs in front of the fire, she'd picked up the napkin under her glass and sketched the Vice-Principal Eric was lampooning. Her caricature was as acid as his words, and he'd laughed when she held it to his eyes—not too close, she'd learned to recognise his small vanities about fading eyes and shrinking gums.

He'd untwined himself from their lax contortion and grabbed the manuscript book in which he recorded thoughts for his more-or-less extempore lectures. Once he'd scribbled down his comments on the VP, he folded the napkin into the page and kissed her. So it began.

From then on he spoke, and wrote, as she completed whatever sketch his denunciations had inspired. Sometimes it was a caricature, sometimes a cartoon: familiar faces round a boardroom table or in academic session. Once it was a map of the campus, leaning askew as though drunk and labelled with his virulent renamings: the Chapel becoming the God-Botherer's Rest Home, the Principal's office the Den of Academic Apologists. 'The book', for so they thought of it, drew the poison from their days and became

a precursor to sex; a torrid ejaculation of spleen and disappointment preceding the tenderer one. They shared in both equally.

It was a mature love they had, romantic without sentiment, and if colleagues looked sideways at Eva with her professorial lover a whole quarter-century older than her, she stared straight back. Eric the Head he was called on campus, with no sniggering about the double-entendre. The Head for his intellect—massive, discerning, dispassionate—and Eric because he was egalitarian. He earned more respect on first name terms than any Professor. His classes were intense, his students lively, their grades exceptional.

Academic inferiors loathed Eric—and not impotently. They chipped at his budget and refused his suggestions for new courses. By ganging up in committee they bowdlerised his curriculum. The Cold War was ‘too reactionary’ to teach, Politics of the South should be taught by a Latin American, Threats to Democracy smacked of defeatism. And it wasn’t just the Politics Faculty—across the campus, subjects were denuded of meaning by political correctness. Eric watched it all, fought where he could and wrote ‘the book’ where he couldn’t.

She borrowed the book for his fifty-fifth birthday. It took an hour to photocopy it in Kinko’s. It was a damning account of one university’s surrender to the lowest common denominator and it read like honey and acid. It was good.

He thought so too, when she presented him with the pages, ring-bound and between covers of black suede. He handled it with a reverence she’d never seen him express towards any of his political titles.

‘If this were my testament, I’d be proud,’ he said, kissing her forehead. And so for a while they’d called it the Testament, but he wasn’t happy with the terminology and reverted to *The Manifesto of Mendacity*. He performed some cursory edits, tidying up paragraphs and numbering pages so they read more fluently from the microcosm of the classroom, where he exposed gaping holes in his colleagues’ abilities, through to the macrocosm of fundraising specialists who sold out the College again and again for a few dollars more in the pot. He often pointed out to her the cleverness of her own work until she wrestled it from him to read aloud, highlighting the

passages she thought most apposite. And each time he would say, ‘It’s the best thing I’ve done Eva, this is the truth of politics, writ small and large. I’d like to think what a stir it would cause, but it’s impossible to publish it.’ And one day she’d taken the Manifesto to Kinko’s again, photocopying it and shoving it in an envelope labelled ‘to be published after my death.’ That envelope she put inside another addressed to his literary agent, which she posted. And forgot about.

Eric was fifty-nine when he died, a massive stroke wiping him out seventeen minutes after the pale face and clawed left hand showed the way to the end. He was dead before the ambulance arrived at his apartment. She’d been there, held him. She’d been the one to call his ex-wife, Susan, and give her the news.

She and Susan had known each other pretty well, got on better than they had any right to expect, but it had been a shock to discover Eric had appointed Susan his literary executor. He explained himself on the video cassette. His ‘final words,’ he said, the thoughts he’d always feared he might not get to share when his last moments came.

‘I know you’ll be angry with me, Eva, but you have a life to lead separate from my legacy, whatever that might be. You’re young and I don’t want to hang the anvil of an old academic’s publication list around your neck.’ He went on to talk about how much she’d meant to him, and that he was leaving her a sum of money to complete an independent research project or take a couple of years off. ‘Because, Eva darling, the years you’ve given me have been precious and I want to give some years to you. Be happy, be brave, as you have always been with me, and cut your own path through the academic wilderness. I love you.’

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In the five years she has been writing, KAY SEXTON’s fiction has been chosen for over twenty anthologies. So far, in 2008, she was commissioned to write a short story broadcast on BBC radio, was a finalist in the Willesden Herald fiction contest judged by Zadie Smith, and won the Fort William Festival Contest. Her novel, *Gatekeeper*, is currently with an agent.