

*Scene: (The very beginning of the book.) The setting is the hallway in the State University humanities building; and the faculty cafeteria. It's the first day of fall semester.*

From around the corner of the corridor a door opened, and two angry voices could be heard issuing from it. The voices and accompanying footsteps drew closer.

“You have the soul of a door knob,” said Dr. Beatrice Toyboat-Toyboat.

“And that remark proves that you have the intellect of one,” retorted a male voice. “*Soul my ass...*”

Her adversary’s pronouncement only increased Beatrice’s frustration. “Any philosopher who can’t see the ontological inequality of mind and matter,” she retorted, “has no business running around loose.”

“Uh-huh,” replied the man, Dr. Benedick Toyboat-Toyboat. “And where exactly do you keep this *mind*? Cloud Cuckoo Land, along with the unicorns and your virtue?”

“Ooooo, may I quote you?” Beatrice asked. “Think how it will help your citation index.”

Doctors Toyboat-Toyboat had proved the skeptics wrong by keeping their marriage intact through thick and thin, the good times and the bad, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for over three weeks now.

From the start, their union had seemed improbable. Beatrice Toyboat was an ardent feminist, passionate, liberal, idealistic, and rather plain looking, even for a feminist. Benedick Toyboat was an ardent Trump loyalist and had a certain pipe-smoking, Lincoln Continental charm.

At first, it was curious and amusing that they shared the same surname, the same position in the Philosophy of Mind Department, and even the same office suite. But the fact that they shared absolutely nothing else portended little in the way of a closer relationship. Their squabbles, both lecturers hunkered down behind their desks like warring armies behind their barbed wire, glaring at each other across no man’s—no *person’s*—land and lobbing epithets at the other like so many artillery shells, were the stuff of department legend.

How it came to pass that they fell in love, and what it was that held them together, were mysteries that no one had unraveled. Perhaps it was the unremitting close proximity that forged the bonds of affection. Perhaps, imprisoned together within the four walls of their office suite, semester in, semester out, they came to know each other’s character fully and intimately and glimpsed the real human being beyond the stereotypical differences that on the surface repelled them. Perhaps just a few traits pushed them apart, like the natural repulsion of two magnets, north pole to north pole, and it merely needed a minor reversal of orientation to bring other traits into violent attraction, north pole to south, as it were. Then again, it might just have been some weird mutual Stockholm Syndrome thing.

The practice of husband and wife concatenating their surnames upon marriage was more than *de rigueur* in faculty circles—it was practically a *sine qua non*. Still, there were those who found it peculiar that Beatrice and Benedick had done so, given that they had the same last name: Toyboat.

It was an item of some speculation on campus, until one evening at a faculty mixer, the lips of someone in the know were loosened by the liberal application of a very nice vintage of sherry. According to this source, neither Toyboat was willing to run the risk, in the event that they did call themselves simply Mr. and Ms. Toyboat, that their acquaintances would assume that it was *their* Toyboat that had been dropped. Mr. Toyboat rejected such a possibility as an affront to a thousand years of precedent and professed that Ms. Toyboat may just as well publicly geld him. Though intrigued, Ms. Toyboat took the high road and chose not to take him up on the offer. But on this issue they felt alike, for she considered even the appearance of patrilinealism tantamount to clitoridectomy. Concatenation was the only option.

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As the newlyweds were proceeding down the hallway, Dr. Abelard Spado, the Philosophy of Mind department head, was leading Stafford Phelan out of his office and into the crowded hallway of Darnton Humanities Building. There amid the crush of students leaving one class and heading off to the next, they encountered two fellow faculty members, both male and both unknown to Stafford Phelan, since it was his first day on the job.

The first individual was a square-shouldered man in his fifties who walked with a long, precise stride, sort of a goosetstep-lite. His hair was brown (tinged with gray) and slicked down. His eyes smoldered, and he sported a toothbrush mustache of a type rarely seen in society since those regrettable incidents of the 1930s and '40s. Raising his voice above the background din, Abelard Spado greeted him pleasantly: "Good morning, Verner."

The second individual was thin and tall, probably six feet two. He was just on the far side of sixty, and his slate gray hair was so gnarly that it resisted gravity's tug and grew more or less sideways. Dr. Spado acknowledged him with a frown: "Dr. Freimann."

It didn't occur to Spado to introduce Phelan to them, nor vice versa, and in fact remembering to do so would have been decidedly out of character for the department head.

Just then the Toyboat-Toyboats, still immersed in their exchange of views, rounded the corner and came into view.

"Rutting marmoset," said Benedick.

"Sociopathic sodomite."

"Jade."

"Capon."

As head of the department, Dr. Abelard Spado knew that for propriety's sake he ought to quash this embarrassing public display. But frankly he lacked the resolution. However, Verner—he of the

toothbrush mustache—was convinced that destiny had singled himself out to lead the department and had no such reticence. In a loud, Teutonic voice he admonished them both.

“Toyboat-Toyboat, Toyboyt-Toyboyt—kindly zease ziss un-zeemly bickering. Professional yel-ousies, personal inzults, und childish outbursts haff no place in za hallowed halls uff learning.”

“They really ought to confine that sort of thing to the faculty lounge where it belongs,” Dr. Riley Freimann suggested helpfully. He winked at Phelan.

“I’ll thank you not to speak to my wife in that tone, Verner,” growled Mr. Toyboat-Toyboat.

Ms. Toyboat-Toyboat displayed no such concerns for the sensitivities of her husband. But apparently the interdiction had served at least a diversionary role, for the couple proceeded down the stairs and out of the building without further violence.

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Giving Stafford Phelan the once-over, Dr. Freimann decided to indulge in the social pleasantries that the department head had not. He held out his hand to Phelan. “Hi. I’m Riley Freimann. I take it you’ve joined our merry band?”

“Yes, I’m the new junior lecturer. Stafford Phelan. Pleased to meet you.”

“And this is Verner,” said Phelan.

This gentleman clicked his heels and said, “Güt morning.”

The formalities concluded, Dr. Spado led Phelan, Freimann, and Verner across the street to have lunch. It being Native American day at the faculty cafeteria, they gamely accepted their servings of pemmican, muktuk, and succotash and proceeded to the dining room, where several of their department peers were gathered at a table and engaged in discussion.

“But surely you agree that all substance is physical,” pleaded Dr. Toyboat-Toyboat. (The one with the penis, that is.)

“Depending on what you mean by ‘substance,’ I most certainly do *not*,” retorted the vagina-bearing Toyboat-Toyboat.

Instantly enthralled, Dr. Spado strode to the table and sat down, abandoning his young charge.

“Shit,” muttered Freimann underneath his breath. “It’s ontology-hour at the feeding trough.”

*Damn*, thought Stafford. *I always mix up ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology.’ Ontology: Being, reality, ultimate substance. Epistemology: Knowledge—what it is and what its limits are. No wait—I’ve got it backward! No, no—I was right the first time.*

“Now, let’s not be hasty,” said an eminently forgettable white male of medium height, medium weight, and medium age, with hair and eye color that could best be described as medium-brown.

“I for one agree with Mike,” said Dr. Freimann—who having just arrived along with Phelan, Verner, and the department head, couldn’t possibly have known what he was agreeing with.

At this point an elegant woman apparently of the Hindu persuasion drifted silently up to the table. In height and weight she approximated the arithmetic mean; but Stafford Phelan noticed that the dimensions of her buttocks somewhat exceeded it. He made an effort to squelch the mental image of enjoying her doggy style.

She was forty-ish and dark-complected compared to her occidental peers. Her most striking features were the thickness of her lips, which would have done Mick Jagger proud, and her abundant black hair, rare among women of the Indian subcontinent because of its curliness, which tempted the weak-willed to spread wide their fingers and run them through it. She wore a lime-green sari that concealed her feet, and the languor and motionlessness with which she walked made it almost seem as if she were floating rather than walking.

“Lovely sari,” noted Riley Freimann. “Or is it just an illusion?”

“Dr. Freimann,” she replied, “each time vee chat, I grow more and more pleased that you have no real existence.”

“I’m afraid Dr. Freimann is our department ironist,” Dr. Spado observed without pleasure.

“None there be of so free will as he who hath attained tenure,” quoted Freimann. “Spinoza, if I remember correctly.” Turning to Phelan, he said, “In addition to my irony gig, I’m the department’s predicate dualist.”

Phelan must have unconsciously wrinkled his brow, because Freimann smiled and said, “Yes, it’s hard to keep them all straight. ‘The irreducibility of mental predicates to physical predicates.’”

Stafford went into fight-or-flight mode. *Shit! What’s a “predicate” again? Oh—“To affirm something as a quality, attribute, or property.” For example: “Sally has big tits.” “Big tits” is a predicate of “Sally.” So predicate dualism is the belief that, though only physical substance exists, nevertheless mental predicates and mental events are more than just physical predicates and physical events.*

The department head apparently remembered himself and said to Phelan: “Dr. Parvati Sugandhityoni is our departmental idealist.” She placed her hands in the prayer-like namaskar position and bowed her head to Stafford.

*Ah, thought Phelan. An idealist: One who denies the existence of physical reality and believes only the mind and its products exist. That explains the repartee between her and Freimann.*

The department head having again lost track of his duties, Stafford felt obliged to introduce himself. “Hi, I’m Stafford Phelan. I’m the new junior lecturer. I’m happy to meet you all.”

“Welcome, Mr. Phelan,” pronounced the aforesaid forgettable white male. “I’m Dr. William Wilmer Williams.”

Wait, Stafford thought to himself. *Didn’t Freimann just call him “Mike?”*

Williams stood up and offered his hand, which Stafford shook. “I’m the department functionalist,” said Williams.

Stafford was instantly able to pigeon-hole Williams’ philosophical school. *Functionalism: The belief that the physical basis of mind is irrelevant: Any system that processes sensory inputs into behavioral outputs functionally qualifies as a mind—even inanimate objects.*

“Yes,” said Riley Freimann, “as a functionalist, Mike doesn’t trouble himself with whether the mind exists or not, unlike the rest of us poor hacks, do you, Mike?”

“We functionalists respect all of your heartfelt opinions,” replied Mike/William/Bill/Dr. Williams. “We merely feel that, at this point in history, more progress will be made by bypassing that contentious issue and focusing on how the mind, if I may use that term, actually functions.”

By the friendly, good-humored manner in which Dr. Williams expressed himself, Stafford took him to be a pleaser.

“Dr. Toyboat-Toyboat there is our property dualist,” the department head continued. Benedick merely grunted. “And next to him is his spouse, Dr. Toyboat-Toyboat, a substance duelist.”

Lolling back in her chair, her legs crossed, her right arm draped casually over the chair beside her, Beatrice Toyboat-Toyboat gave Stafford a look that would have ignited any nearby piles of old, oily rags. “And what school do you adhere to ... Mr. Phelan?”

At this point it should be noted that Stafford Phelan was what one might as well just give up and describe as tall, dark, and handsome; and, moreover, far too virile to ever be pictured shirtless in an Abercrombie & Fitch® store window. His prenatal environment was blessed with an unusually elevated level of testosterone, and as a result he was six-feet-one, a hundred-and-eighty pounds, raven-haired, with brown eyes and an angular chin and cheekbones. Inevitably he was left shadowed by five o’clock.

“Me?” Stafford replied. “Oh, I’m just a junior lecturer. I don’t claim to propound one interpretation more than another. I’m here to learn as much as to teach.”

“Hmmp,” grumbled Mr. Toyboat-Toyboat. He seemed to have taken an instant dislike to Stafford.

“Vut ver vee discussing, if I may ask?” said Dr. Sugandhityoni.

“Hah!” Verner snorted. He seemed intent on matching Benedick Toyboat-Toyboat scowl for scowl. “Vizical zubstance. Vaste uff time. Vun egg-speggs nuh-sing of interest.”

“Now, Verner,” said Spado the department head, “Maintain your humor. We’re all on the same side here.” For a moment Stafford Phelan thought he was speaking of NATO.