

## And the Light Shines On: Sic Luceat Lux Vestra

It was a dreary day when I awoke, stiff from the yardwork I did in a fit of restless, Covid-19 boredom yesterday, and worried about the lessons I had to post that I didn't get to yesterday. I sat stolidly in front of the bright computer screen, and despite the many cups of coffee I had consumed, I just couldn't seem to get into the rhythm of my work. I struggled for an hour trying to make an engaging voice-over for the reading about James Baldwin for my general education literature students, and I was boring myself so much my teeth fell asleep. Sighing, I tried again, working to interject some energy into the lecture, and wondering if the kids would even listen to it. If they didn't, I wouldn't blame them. They have enough on their minds already, dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. And could I really be an online professor?

I got up to stretch and have yet another cup of coffee, my fifth, I think, and the phone rang, startling me. Not that many people call! "Hello?" I queried. "Hi, Dr. Callmas? This is Cheryl Durant." The phone call wasn't a total surprise—Cheryl had said on Facebook she might be calling me. She's an English teacher now, and I am sure a good one, and she had said something about my Zooming in on one of her classes, but I didn't really expect her to follow through. I kind of thought it was one of those "Let's do lunch" types of things. Still, it was certainly a welcome break from that danged voice-over! We talked for over an hour, about LU back in the day, about her life as a teacher, about her kids and my dogs. "You really changed my whole life, you know," she said. "I've tried really hard to be like the teacher you are." My eyes dampened. "That's quite a compliment, Cheryl. Still, it's a two-way street. You made me into the teacher I am." There was a pause. The subject was changed. The matter continued. The memories flooded back.

Year: 1995. I had just been hired as an assistant professor to be a generalist at Lindenwood College, a very small, struggling liberal arts school. I was only 31 years old and not even finished with my PhD. Although I had taught for a couple of years as a TA, I was far from confident. The first day of my "real job, real life" commenced. I had an 8:00 composition class high on the third floor of Roemer Hall. I had dressed carefully that day, and I was sweating not just from the heat of the non-air-conditioned room but from nerves. Could I do this thing? Could I be a PROFESSOR? I entered room 313, and tried to give a confident grin which turned into a weak smile. The class began. I regarded my 13 or so students and said, "Um, good morning. I'm Professor Callmas. How are you all today?" Silence. My hands were sweating even more. "Let's get started. Composition is an ongoing process, and I want to see where you all are with writing. So today, we'll just do a little diagnostic essay. No grades at stake. Just write me an essay on something you believe in." Still, silence. They stared at me and I stared at them. "Please, take out a piece of paper and a pen, and write about 500 words. What do you believe in, and why?" I gave that weak smile again. All went

silently to work. All but one.

The one sat at her desk, paper and pen in front of her, and she was looking down, her face pinched and drawn. Was it defiance? Should I scold her? Slowly, I went to her. Slowly, she raised her head. "Um, is there a problem? Is the prompt not clear?" She looked at me. "What's wrong? Are you okay?" She was pale with two bright spots of red on her cheeks. I knew she was from Alaska—was it the heat? It had to have been over 90 in that classroom. Was she sick? "Um, I can't," she almost whispered. "Can't what?" "I can't write! I can't write! I can't do it!" I'd never seen an animal caught in a trap, but she looked like one: hopeless and scared. It wasn't defiance. I knelt by her desk, and I softened my voice. "Okay. Okay. It's okay. Look, you can write your name, right? Just write down your name." She did. I took the paper from her, and wrote down a sentence: "I believe \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_." "Fill in the blanks. That's all you have to do right now. Just fill in the blanks." She did. "That's great. See, you wrote a thesis! Now, write a paragraph, just a few sentences, about each of those things you put in the blanks. That's all you have to do. You can do it. I'm here. Just do it. I know you can." Inwardly, I was wondering if she could. Was she illiterate? Did she seriously not know how to write? What was she doing at college, this strange little being?

She bent her head, her chestnut hair falling over that pinched face, and she began to write, slowly at first, and then more fluidly, and then more fluidly still. I stayed right there by her desk, and watched her write. "See? You did it. You wrote your very first college essay!" "Yeah, I did, didn't I? I did it!" We smiled at each other. The class ended.

From that moment on, I became her hero. What I did was hardly heroic—I just gave the kid a shot of confidence, and she, unknowingly, did the same for me. She learned she could write. I learned I could teach. Cheryl Duncan, for that was her name, changed her major to English. She signed up for work-study in the English department, and she became more and more and more confident. We began to banter. She'd come into my office where I'd be smoking (allowed in offices at that time) and drinking coffee. "Callmas! Those things will kill you!" "Duncan! Respect your elders!" "Need a freaking gas mask in here!" "Just grade the quizzes, and no lip, okay? You know what? You want to get out of here? Go get me a doughnut." She returned with a fruit cup. "That's not a doughnut, Duncan." "Well, you can kill yourself with smoking or with sugar and fat, but not both." We would laugh at times like those.

Year: 1996. My second year of teaching and Duncan's second year of being an English major. As was characteristic of me, I arrived at work very early one morning, about 6:30. Duncan was sitting cross-legged on the floor outside my office like an overgrown, anxious elf, her dyed duckling yellow short hair in Little Prince-like disarray. She had that pinched look about her again, the one I had seen in the composition class. "Kid, what's wrong?" She looked at me. "My room burned down." "Your . . . room burned down? Come in. Tell me about it." I reached for my cigarettes and lighter and put them down. "Well, there was an

electrical fire in my room, and—everything's gone!" "How is your hamster?" (She had a hamster, Texas, she would take nearly everywhere with her. These days, ole Texas would be called an ESA). She looked at me, tears in her eyes, sobs caught in her throat. "I think he's dead . . . and, and . . . I heard kids laughing about 'Texas Toast!'" Oh, sweet baby girl. I sat and regarded her. "Okay. Okay. It's okay, Duncan, it's okay." As it turns out, Texas was fine; a firefighter had scooped him out of his cage, and Texas bit the firefighter and was dropped on the floor. But I knew Texas wasn't trivial. She sat in my office for a bit, and she calmed down. We got her another room, and I got up a little subscription for her for books and clothes and the like. Her mother called me to thank me—"Cheryl just lost it!" "Lost what?" "I mean, she just broke down. Thank you so much for looking after her!" What I did was so little. I offered comforting noises, got the kid some materials. That's all. But she knew she was cared for. Cheryl continued her college, absolutely rocking it with a rap rendition of Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*, talked about books and books and books with me, and happily went off to soccer practice wearing her little Spiderman backpack. I went to most of her games and many of her practices; her parents were far away in Alaska, and I enjoyed watching the kids play.

Year: 1998. Springtime. Duncan's third year, my third year teaching at LU. I came to work one morning early. I opened a memo: "Mandatory faculty meeting at 8:00." I went, wondering what the deal was. President Spellmann took the podium. A Texan working class man, he drawled out, "Somethin' terrible has happened. A girl has been killed. We are the victims of a dumping. The body was found by the Commerce Bank (now the Welcome Center). Nobody at Lindenwood was involved. Do what you do—teach. Keep the kids calm. Cooperate with authorities. This mess will soon be straightened out, but the Major Case Squad is here." The room started to buzz louder and louder. I got up, put on my backpack, and went to class. Rumors abounded. "I heard it was a Lindenwood student that got killed!" "She was decapitated!" "Is someone going to kill us?" "Guys, guys, guys," I said, "Let's focus. It will be straightened out. It will be okay." The girl's head was found in a porta-potty, and the police, after cleaning the head up some, started circulating pictures trying to find out who the victim was. Cheryl was on crutches after having knee surgery for a soccer injury. I encountered her on the cobbled sidewalk, and her shocked face was white again, pinched again, in sharp contrast to her now shoulder-length purple hair. "Cheryl. What's the matter?" "Amber didn't come home last night. Oh my god, Dr. Callmas, oh my god!" Amber was her sister. "Cheryl. Come with me. It's going to be okay. Come on, now, come on—let's go to my office." Amber was fine—she had spent the night with a boyfriend, as we soon ascertained with a few phone calls. But for that one horrible hour, both of us were wondering if Amber had been murdered, an hour during which Cheryl sat with her head in her hands, and I had no idea what to do. Amber, thankfully, was fine. But for that semester, helicopters buzzed overhead, "the Lindenwood murder" was on every news, and police were looking for "a Caucasian, from 18-22 years old, wearing a flannel shirt and a ball cap"—pretty much a

description of every male at LU. As it turned out, it was one of our students who had murdered a fifteen-year-old child at an on-campus gathering, raped her and murdered her, cut off her head and threw it in a porta-potty, cut off her hands and discarded them. The campus community grew closer, more silent, more stressed. Rules were tightened after the murder—no visitation, certainly no parties. The campus dispersed in May, and life went on, if more somberly.

Year: 1999. Spring term. I was teaching literary criticism for the first time, and I was enjoying the teaching of it. Duncan had grown into a competent, confident senior and was flying through the puzzles of poststructuralism. We hung out together on campus, and I enjoyed our banter. I was so proud of our little English major! One day, Duncan came to my office, flung her backpack (not the Spiderman one anymore) down and flung herself angrily in a chair. "What?" I asked her. "Just what now?" "I got freaking kicked out is what!" she answered, ruffling her hands through her now chestnut hair. "Kicked . . . out? What the hell are you talking about?" "I got KICKED OUT, Callmas! I'm not going to graduate!" "Slow down. Just slow the hell down. Tell me." "I was, like, at a party, and I got caught, okay? NO drinking, NO parties, and I'm EXPELLED, that's what!" I was chair of the department then. "Okay. Okay. Cheryl, look, it's okay. It's not the end of the world." "YES, it freaking IS! What am I going to tell my parents??? They're coming here for my graduation next month, and there isn't going to be a graduation!" "Cheryl. Write a letter of appeal to the Dean of Students. I'll support you. Just say you made a mistake and you're sorry and . . ." "I'm NOT sorry! Everyone parties! I just got CAUGHT! It's not fair and I won't risk my integrity by saying 'I'm sorry' when I'm NOT! I'll take the freaking consequences, okay? I'm not going to lie, not even for you! You're telling me to LIE!" "Lie if you have to. There was one successful martyr, and look what happened to him! You WILL write the freaking letter, okay?!" I calmed down. "Look, kid, just do it. Write the letter. Jump through the hoops. Trust me, it's not worth your future—is it integrity or pride speaking here?" She glared at me. I sighed. "Look—I know I taught you about Kant's categorical imperative and that once that imperative has been chosen, it can't be broken. You chose integrity. I know that. I get that." I lit a cigarette and took a drag. "But break it. Yeah, I'm asking you to lie. I am asking you to write it. Just like you wrote that essay in your freshman year, remember? Want me to draft a thesis for you?" She wanly smiled. "No, it's okay, Callmas. I think I know how now." She wrote the letter. It was approved. There was a graduation, and I watched my kid, my First Kid, graduate.

Cheryl sailed through her master's program, and told me she "rocked it" due to my literary criticism class. "I can talk Foucault with the best of them!" she proudly told me. She became a teacher, got married, had two beautiful kids, and has now, astoundingly, been teaching for 20 years, five years fewer than I have.

Year: 2020. The Spring of Covid-19. Schools on shut down. Everyone getting used to the "new abnormal." Classes online. Duncan called, now Durant, I guess, now Cheryl, a

colleague. "Nina," she said, "what is our job right now as educators? How can we help the kids? What can we do?" I paused, reaching for my cigarettes and lighter and then pushing them away. "I don't know, Cheryl. Tell them we hear them. Tell them we care. Show them community of caring, because they're young, scared, confused, and they'll remember that a lot more than any curriculum. And, by the way, you said you always wanted to be an educator like me. Has it occurred to you that I am the way I am because of you? You taught me to teach."

I envision that young woman now—not so young, really—she's 43, a grown-up lady. And I know what she'll say to those students lucky enough to have her as their teacher. "Okay. Okay. Okay. It's going to be okay. Let's just take this first step."

And so the motto of my college lives. *Sic luceat lux vestra*. And it does. It shines on. It only takes a match to light a fire. Duncan/Durant has become that fire. Shine on, you fiery kid. Shine on.