

LANGUAGE

BY LEWIS SHINER

TOM HEARD his office door click shut. He looked up and saw her and his palms started to sweat.

Her name was Jennifer. She was maybe 18. Her blonde perm had grown out dark at the roots and her eyes showed a little too much white around the irises. It gave her a wanton look that Tom had tried to ignore all semester.

“Is it true,” she asked, “what you said in class this morning? About the Malaysians?” She sat down across from his desk and slouched until her neck hit the back of the chair.

“The Malay,” Tom said. “Yes, it’s true.” It seemed there was only one word for food in Malay, and it could mean anything from “this is my lunch” to “eat me.” It was the sort of one-liner meant to keep the attention of an eight-o’clock Freshman Comp section, not something Tom wanted brought up to him afterward.

“I just don’t understand,” Jennifer said. “I mean, how do they ever know what they’re saying to each other?”

Tom couldn’t keep his own signals straight. Jennifer’s legs had drifted apart, and Tom could see her long thighs disappear up the shadowed legs of her Bermuda shorts. Is this an accident? Tom thought. Is she really coming on to me? It felt like an accident. Like a car crash, happening in slow motion.

“Well,” Tom said. “Maybe you’d want to do a little research on it. Think about it for your term paper.”

“I’d probably need a lot of help.”

She seemed to touch the end of her tongue to her upper lip. There were trees all around the building, blooming furiously, and the room was too shadowy for Tom to be sure of anything. “One place you might start,” Tom said, “is to look at the way language can also *expand* concepts.” In the charged atmosphere his words had begun to take on double meanings. “Like the Eskimo. The Innuits have six different words for walrus, depending on age, strength, sex...uh, all those kinds of things. An *ipiksaulik* is a two-year old, male or...female. A *timartik* is a large male. And so on. For example, they don’t have a word that just means ‘snow.’ There’s a different word for every kind.”

“That’s really amazing,” Jennifer said. “How do you know all this stuff?” She crossed her legs, but at the same time her eyes widened and green-filtered sunlight glistened across them.

“It’s useless, most of it,” Tom said.

“I think it’s fascinating.”

“You want a research topic?” he asked her, suddenly gripped by a wild impulse, sheer sexual longing out of control. He recognized it, saw it every day in his classes. It was what made desperate boys wear hideous clothes and smash furniture at frat parties and shout insults out the windows of Trans Ams.

“Think,” he said, “how a more specific language could change an entire society. Suppose, for example, English didn’t have the phrase ‘I love you.’ Lots of languages don’t. Spanish, for instance. Suppose we had fifty different, very specific, phrases instead. ‘I like being seen with you in front of my friends,’ or ‘I just want to have great sex with you and not call you for three weeks,’ or ‘I need somebody around when I’m seventy and wrinkled and ugly and maybe you’d hang around that long,’ or ‘you seem to want some empty reassurance so here it is.’”

Jennifer turned sideways in the chair and put her head on her left hand. Tom could now see the white band of her bra as it passed under her right arm, and just a hint of the lace on the cup. His heart pounded so loudly he wondered if Jennifer could hear it too.

“Or how about,” he said, “I want to sleep with you so you’ll give me an A in your class.”

She didn’t flinch. He’d thought, maybe even hoped, it would send her out of the office in either rage or embarrassment. Instead she just sat there, with a smile he knew he would have to look at for the rest of the semester. Language had failed him again.

“I think that’ll be all for today, Jennifer.”

“Okay, Dr. Marsh,” she said, getting up slowly. “See you in class.”

LINDA HAD GONE to bed. Both kids had been tucked in hours ago. Tom walked around downstairs in the vague glow that trickled out of the kitchen. On one wall were the pots and fishing nets he’d brought back from the Mexican village where he’d done his dissertation. He’d spent a summer there fifteen years ago, recording what he could of a Mayan dialect from its last living speaker.

When Cortez arrived there had been over a thousand different languages spoken in the New World. Now there less than four hundred, and the number dropped every year. What English didn’t destroy it corrupted; the words “OK” and “car” and “jeans” had become part of virtually every vocabulary on the planet.

Tom picked up a Mayan fishing club, his fingers reading the information in the hard, smooth wood of the handle. That, he thought, had been an adventure. Fucking an 18-year-old student was not an adventure. It was lunacy.

Of course it was. Then why did he feel like somebody had smeared Vick’s Vapo-Rub all over his crotch?

LINDA LAY on her stomach, not quite asleep. Tom undressed and got in bed next to her. “Rub my back?” she asked drowsily.

“Sure,” Tom said. He reached across with his right hand and idly worked the muscles in her neck. The touch and smell of her skin still excited him. Or maybe it was just residual lust from Jennifer. Not that it mattered. He knew he could make love to her, but he also knew she wasn’t in the mood. It would mean laboring over her while she lay quietly with her eyes closed, and he wasn’t in the mood for that himself.

At dinner she'd imitated an old woman from her office, made Tom laugh as hard as the kids. Afterwards he found she'd forgotten to grease the lasagna pan again and it had taken him twenty minutes to scrub off the carbonized sauce.

"Mmmmm," she said. A minute or so later she turned her head to face him and said, "I love you."

Tom stopped rubbing. She was asleep. "Yes, I know," he said to the darkness. "But what do you mean?"

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