



## dostoevsky & lucille – 1st person ('blah)

I returned from the meeting with the chair of the department feeling embittered and hostile. The topic of discussion had been plastic forks. It wasn't the topic's first appearance. As always, I was blamed for the "unreasonably swift" depletion of the department's supply. The reason? Gilbert Hemingway once caught me removing two forks from the utensil drawer.

"Fork hog," he muttered, spying on me from down the hallway.

I squinted at him. "Excuse me?"

His square, bearded head angled out of his office door. The head disappeared from view as if yanked by a string and the door slammed shut.

He confronted me about the issue later that afternoon in the men's room. I was halfway finished with my business when he sidled up to the urinal next to me.

"I saw you," he whispered, raising a bristly eyebrow.

I squinted at him. "Excuse me?"

He refused to believe me when I told him that the additional fork was for my officemate. After that, whenever the supply of forks went dry, he called me into his office and reprimanded me in various passive-aggressive ways. Sometimes he questioned my motives. Sometimes he insulted my character. Sometimes he threatened to cut utensil funding so as to force me to bring my own tackle into work. He never raised his voice or gesticulated in any way; he was invariably calm and pragmatic. Today, however, he threw a half-eaten plum at me. I was a relatively new assistant professor

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who had a long way to go before securing tenure. The gesture worried me.

I returned to my office to find Bob Dostoevsky blowdrying his armpits. Like Gilbert Hemingway and the rest of the faculty employed by Corndog University's English department, Bob had legally changed his surname to an author in his field who was of interest to him in some pedagogical or scholarly way. Additionally, he had done his best to dress himself up like the Russian novelist, sporting dimestore spectacles, a long greasy beard, and a motheaten overcoat. He had grafted eye bags onto his face, too. These were departmental requirements. When I was initially interviewed for the job by the search committee, I thought it was a joke. When I later accepted the job and moved to Bliptown, I discovered it was reality. I considered reporting the instance of absurdity to the HEA (Higher Education Armada). But I couldn't afford to burn any bridges, and I had racked up unspeakable financial debt over the years. I needed a fulltime income. So I agreed to appropriate the surname of an unknown speculative fiction author whose body of work, in my view, was vastly underrated, and while I refused to get plastic surgery, I tried my best to recreate myself in his image. Fortunately I looked a lot like him. My choice wasn't well-received. But it was tolerated on the condition that my colleagues could refer to me by the nickname Blah Blah Blah.

"Blah!" Dostoevsky shouted over the blare of the hairdryer. "Hello there!" The size of the sweat rings on his underarms indicated that he had just come back from teaching class.

"Hi Bob!" I shouted, and collapsed into my chair. The office we shared was a small, grimy dungeon. Its only light emanated from outmoded computer screens and a dim lamp that sat on Dostoevsky's desk. The paint of its stony, gunmetal grey walls flaked off in places, and there were nicks, abrasions and skid marks everywhere. In one wall was a large hole. Now and then a wild lobster crawled out and harassed us. Books didn't sit on shelves in neat, sequenced rows; they lay in dirty piles on the floor and on our desktops. There were no windows. The office was hardly the romantic portrait of plaquedemia I had envisioned when I decided to sell my soul to graduate school.

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Dostoevsky sweated like an animal. It took him nearly five minutes to blowdry each armpit, and when he finished, he blowdried his eyebrows. Then he turned the machine off and began to eat a banana.

He peeled the fruit slowly, guardedly, with precision, as if it were a bomb and peeling it too fast would set it off. I tried to ignore him, observing him only out of the corners of my eyes while I prepared a lesson for my next class.

At last Dostoevsky removed the entire peel from the banana. He placed the peel in a Ziploc bag, sealed it, and deposited it in a desk drawer. After inspecting the banana for brown spots, he shoved the whole thing in his hairy mouth.

He bumbled something at me. I couldn't decipher it. He bumbled again. I still didn't understand. He swallowed half of his oversized mouthful and explained, "I said—bananas are my favorite fruit. Because of the potassium."

I nodded and smiled politely. "Potassium," I echoed. I didn't like my officemate. Then again, I didn't hate him. That's more or less how I felt about all human beings. "Are you teaching this afternoon?"

He swallowed more of the banana. "I'm supposed to be. I'm holding office hours instead. Nobody'll bug me that way. I haven't had a student-thing visit me on its own time in years. What about you?"

"Yeah. Advanced Neuromanticism. But I really don't feel like teaching. I'll probably send my 'gänger instead."

"Haven't you already used it once this week?"

"Yeah. But I'm just not fit to deal with my student-things' hoo-hah today. I'm hung over or something. Screw it. I'm sending my 'gänger."

Dostoevsky shrugged. He swallowed the remainder of his banana and belched.

I got out of my chair and opened the closet standing next to my desk. Inside were two androids hanging there like window-store dummies. One was a replica of Dostoevsky, the other of me. Dostoevsky enjoyed taking his android home, dressing it up like a go-go boy and sodomizing it; consequently he named it after his boyhood lover, Petunia Littlespank. I lacked the penchant for that kind of activity and named mine after the thing that plaquedemia had

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stolen from me: Dr. Identity. Tall and broad-shouldered with sharp, birdlike features, the android wore a Saussurian suit that changed shape, color and texture depending upon its proximity to other *en masse* fashion statements. Right now it was a neon green zoot suit like mine. Dr. Identity's eyes were florescent white and it had a scar on its forehead, the aftermath of having a wen removed by a discount street surgeon. Except for these latter two abnormalities, I was the spitting image of my 'gänger.

According to the department's faculty and student-thing handbook, assistant professors like me were allowed to use their 'gängers for only one class session per week, unlike full professors, who could use them for up to seventy-five percent of their classes. Today was the first time I would violate that stipulation. Most likely nobody would suspect the offense, and if they did, it wouldn't merit more than an invective. And I was no stranger to invectives.

I reached around Dr. Identity's head and switched it on. Sound of a fuse shorting out...Then its incandescent eyes opened, and its stiff limbs came to life.

"Hello," it said.

"Whatever," I said.

"Say hi to Petunia for me!" Dostoevsky chirped.

Dr. Identity stepped out of the closet and dusted itself off. "What day is it?"

"Thursday."

"Jesus Christ."

"Save it. Here." I handed it the half-finished lesson plan I had drawn up. "Start out with a short lecture on literary representations of contemporary cyborg bodies, using Dick and Gibson as historical reference points. Then discuss the science fiction genre's employment of Keatsian tropes and what they connote in terms of postcapitalist reality. Make sure to mention texts in which Keats appears as a cybernetic organism. After that you can do what you want. Tell jokes. Pick your ass. Just don't let anybody leave."

Dr. Identity sighed. "Okay. But for the record, I disapprove."

"Duly noted."

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“People don’t like you around here as it is. Especially Hemingway.”

“People don’t like anybody around here. And Hemingway’s a jackass.”

Dostoevsky removed an orange from his drawer. As he had told me many times before, it was his second favorite fruit—because of the vitamin C. He peeled the orange with the same calculated fastidiousness as the banana.

It was at this point that our resident lobster decided to make an appearance. A few days had passed since we last saw her, although we frequently heard her squeaking and growling inside of the walls. Dostoevsky and I named her Lucille after the star of the twentieth century television show *I Love Lucy*, which we both, coincidentally, had scholarly and extracurricular interest in. More than that, however, the lobster resembled Lucille Ball’s hairdo in certain crouching positions. We had been trying to kill her for over six months now. But she was extremely quick, agile and easily upset. The creature crawled out of her hole and scuttled up the wall that Dostoevsky’s desk was pushed up against, leaving a slimy brown residue in her wake. I carefully leaned to one side, opened a drawer, and removed a machete. Dostoevsky froze in mid-peel, chin wrinkled, eyes bulging. Dr. Identity froze, too, its eyes darting back and forth between me, my officemate and Lucille.

The lobster haphazardly scrambled across the wall, then retired to a ceiling corner. Breathing deeply, she wiped her brow with big red claws, like a boxer between rounds.

“Toss your orange over your shoulder,” I whispered to Dostoevsky.

He turned his head and looked fiercely at me.

“She wants the orange,” I assured him. Actually I wasn’t sure what she wanted. But the orange might distract Lucille, if only for a moment. All I needed was a moment...

An agonized expression overcame Dostoevsky as if relinquishing the orange was comparable to losing a limb. He bore his rotten teeth, knitted his burly monobrow.

“Ditch that orange, sucker,” I said. “Do it.” I tightened my grip on the handle of the machete.

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My officemate tightened his grip on the orange. “I won’t do it. You can’t make me do it.”

Even when he was trying to speak softly, Dostoevsky had an annoyingly resonant voice. At the sound of it Lucille stopped fidgeting and cocked her head, glaring at Dostoevsky with two beady, onyx eyeballs.

I peered at Dr. Identity, pushed out my lips, and nodded.

The android lashed out. In one quick, fluid motion it slapped the orange out of my officemate’s hand. The fruit splattered against the wall on the other side of the office. Dostoevsky yelped. Lucille hissed. Cocking my blade, I slipped past Dr. Identity, leapt onto Dostoevsky’s desk and swung at the lobster. She dodged the blow and the machete slammed into the wall. Shards of plaster showered my face as Lucille hopped onto the ceiling and tore across it. I spun around and swung the machete up into the ceiling, missed again, made to hop off of the desk and tripped over Dostoevsky’s head. Moving in fasttime, Dr. Identity strode forward. It bent over, threw out its arms, caught and positioned me on my feet.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“My eye!” Dostoevsky clutched his face. The toe of my shoe had tagged him below his left eye and mauled the surgically implanted bag beneath it. “I just had this thing upgraded! Do you know how much this model costs?” He pointed helplessly at the damaged good.

Lucille emitted a high-pitched squeal from behind me. I slowly turned my head and looked over my shoulder. She lingered just above the spot where the orange had struck the wall. Her pointed head was arched up and she stared at me as if I had washed down one of her parents with a large glass of sauvignon blanc. Antennae menacingly waved back and forth.

I smirked.

Lucille shrieked.

She opened her claws and leapt at me...

It was a close call. I barely managed to duck my head out of the way. I felt

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one of the lobster's cold, brittle legs pass across my cheek as she sailed by...and landed on Dostoevsky's face. She didn't let go. Dr. Identity and I stared blankly at Dostoevsky as he jumped out of his chair and began to stagger around the office. Arms flailing over his head, he cursed, he cried, he smacked himself, he accused us of sabotaging him, he accused us of being jealous of his eye bags...

Eventually Lucille grew tired. She unfastened her grip and fell to the floor, taking her victim's spectacles with her. Dostoevsky's face was red, scratched and swollen. And both of his eye bags were ruined now. He stood there in a daze, blinking, gurgling...Then his eyes rolled back into his head and he fainted.

I tried to stomp on Lucille as she hastened back into her hole.