

He was white-haired and velvet-eyed, spoke German as flawlessly as Spanish and French— Argentine childhood, studies in Paris, French parentage—and taught critical theory by way of a University of California’s French department. Marcel “Marc” Blanchard was my heart-throb during graduate studies.

“We always want what we can’t have,” he said, gazing at me from behind dark, dark eyes. I didn’t appreciate the let-down then, though I do now.

He was thin but always arrived elegantly dressed which, while concealing his gaunt frame, made him appear aloof. Yet to someone pursuing her love of languages, his linguistic finesse could be electrifying. “Ist das euer Stammtisch?” he once commented as I conversed with a couple of grad students from the German department. Delighted at his grasp of the idiom I burst out laughing, “Stammtisch” meaning a pub table continually reserved for high-ranking regulars. He didn’t crack a smile, only but shaped his mouth into an astonished O as his eyes feasted on my laughter.

I’d thought him privileged; now I wondered what sorrows made laughter a foreign terrain for him. I conjectured his parents to have been Nazi sympathizers who abandoned their country once the tide turned.

Critical theory was my anchor to sanity, for I’d landed in an English department where dialogue was nonexistent and misunderstandings ballooned into grotesque affronts. Two women doctoral candidates were suing each other, the department, and a professor in it, and the backlash against women nobodies had escalated into absurdity. For me it began with an African-American professor. Behind him the white males fell to it like gorillas on a rampage. Yes, the campus sported an anti-harassment policy. The department chair used it against me, saying I had harassed the African American. The sole woman tenured prof had her reasons for ignoring the plight of the department’s underdogs, though she published feminist treatises that garnered national attention.

One last time, on my way to Tennessee, I saw Marc at a literary conference. He had changed his frivolous little French mustache into a Mark-Twain-type appendage that I thought quite becoming, as it gentled his ascetic features. Didn’t get the chance to say so, for he was in the company of a woman who commanded his attention.

In Tennessee I took to a man who, if overweight, was also nice-looking in a professorial way. “Benny” held tenure at an institution other than where I taught, which was fortuitous for my “nobody” untenured self. Benny, of course, couldn’t be touched, not even for the coarse language he used on his students. Whenever he recounted his classroom outbursts I thought them regrettable. Though no language professor Benny possesses an extensive vocabulary, which he might have put to use.

He enjoys cooking and is indifferent to alcohol, which was good for me. So why am I single in Wyoming when I could be enjoying companionship in Tennessee?

Benny is beset by an ongoing, low-grade depression. “I’m often so sad,” he’d say, unable to pinpoint the reasons for his melancholy. He stated outright that he hoped to buy the farm once his youngest would graduate from college, who had taken a year to work at an Israeli kibbutz. As long as he contributed financially to her studies there was yet purpose to life. Perhaps his classroom exploits, like bursts of nicotine, afforded small respites from his unipolar condition.

A New York Jew who had drifted south to marry in the Christian tradition, Benny dissolved his marriage once the kids flew the coop, purchased a home of his own but remained friendly with his ex-wife whom in due course I got to know.

“Don’t you want to be around for your children’s future?” I asked. He only shrugged. Though younger than I by a year, he’d already survived three heart attacks. Last time the physician had warned, he told me, “This is it. Change your life, or else.”

Benny could not kick the smoking habit. He switched from cigarettes to pipe and refused to smoke in his car and home, but that’s as far as it went. When we met, his 95-year-old father was living with him; clearly, Benny had no wish to replicate his father’s living and dying. Eventually the old man landed in a facility, where he succumbed soon after. Even then I could not persuade Benny to exercise, which I consider essential to a halfway sane outlook on life.

Benny has high blood pressure and keeps his house virtually refrigerated. Mine is low; the ac reads eighty. Hence, Benny rarely visited me. When I complained about freezing in his home, “Put on a sweatshirt,” he’d say. A sweatshirt in Nashville in July? But he had a cozy duvet on his bed that kept me warm at night.

After retiring to Wyoming it occurred to me to look up “Marc Blanchard” on the internet. Might I drop him an email? To my consternation and sorrow, the man I loved had fought a prolonged battle with cancer that took his life in 2009. A little younger than I, Marc used to crunch raw almonds as he lectured, which made me want to bring him a home-cooked meal or some fresh-baked bread. Only once did I send him something, a slender volume of my poems to let on, I’d come to terms with the wounds from my English studies.

The online memorial says Marc was born in Portugal where his parents found temporary refuge on their flight from the Nazis. Turns out, his mother was Jewish. Like many intellectuals Marc never shared personal stories. (Perhaps he did with family—or a lover.) His seeming hauteur, and his familiarity with German, had caused me to misjudge his past though not the sadness in his eyes. He and Benny had something in common. I don’t mean their Jewish heritage though I can’t say what it is.

Life has its traumas, and women know only their half of it.