

George

mildly fictionalized

By Stephen Muratore

Logic Class

During the year Joseph Morandi sat in his Logic classroom, George Carmichael once gave mild praise to an essay Joseph had written. Later in the year George praised an expose Joseph had gotten published in the school paper. This pleased Joseph especially, since he could get the piece published only by pasting the type-set copy onto the newspaper layout boards himself when the faculty censors were not looking. George once pointed out to the class that Joseph had a good speaking voice. Joseph didn't know why his teacher, known for his spare praise, paid him that particular compliment. It took Joseph half a lifetime to sense what was in it.

George Carmichael was a buttoned-down Brit: well-bred, all self-restraint and impeccable manners: the only teacher who wore a suit and tie to school while the other teachers had taken to beads and dashikis. But George was married to Alicia Laurena, a Flamenco dancer of Spanish blood. He himself once demonstrated to the Logic class *palmas*, and the correct use of the castanettes.

The Play

The Monkey's Paw is a one-act serious drama dealing with the human desire to impose our will over fate. George held the auditions for this play after school one day. Joseph auditioned for either of the two male parts. To audition, he had to read a tragic monologue spoken by the male lead, the father character in the play. Joseph put his heart into the reading, but George cast him in the second male part, the part of the son. After he dismissed all the students, George held Joseph back. "Morandi."

"Yes, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Your reading was far better than all the others'."

"Then, why didn't you cast me in the main part?"

"It's a serious part, and because of the funny character you have created for yourself in real life, your schoolmates will not accept this serious character coming from you. They will see funny Joe on the stage, and will not believe in the serious character."

"But I have this serious character in me too."

"Because of the Joe they see every day, they would not believe it."

The Honors Society

The High School Honors Society chose new members annually, and announced its choices at a general assembly. The election committee was composed of the school principal, a group of teachers, and two Honors Society members. This committee chose new members of the society in secret. No student would know whether he was even a candidate until the new members were announced at the assembly. Members were selected on the basis of academic achievement and leadership qualities. When the announcements were made during his senior year, Joseph was not among the chosen, nor did Joseph expect to be. Joseph never had the desire to be part of this society, nor did Joseph expect ever to qualify for it. Months later, more than a year since Joseph had left George's class, George Carmichael took Joseph aside after school. "Morandi, you didn't make the Honors Society months ago did you?"

"No, Mr. Carmichael, I wouldn't qualify for that."

"Oh, you had the grades alright. That was not what kept you out."

"What, then?"

“To admit a new member, the vote of the committee must be unanimous. Every member must vote in favor of the student. In your case, one teacher voted against you.”

“Why was that?”

“He thought you were not serious.”

This revelation fell like freezing rain. On the one hand, it meant that most of the people on that committee saw something in Joseph that Joseph did not see in himself. On the other, it showed Joseph that he himself was the one who had held him back. Joseph had tried to please people by creating a funny *persona*. It was this ingratiating mask that the one teacher had voted against. That teacher voted against the very thing Joseph had created to get people to like him.

The Articles

Midway into his Senior year, Joseph had left off writing satires for the school paper. Joseph had discovered he could make people laugh, and started producing silly, fluffy, pointless stories instead. Almost a year had elapsed since Joseph had had George as a teacher, and they hardly had spoken to one another in all those months. One day, while Joseph sat in a history class, George poked his head in the door and said to the history teacher, “May I see Morandi please?” Joseph walked out to meet George in the hallway. As soon as the door closed behind Joseph, George pushed him hard, shoving Joseph’s back into the wall. He held the recent edition of the school paper in his hand, opened to Joseph’s latest article. Now George slapped him on the chest with it, leaned forward until his face was close to Joseph’s, and seething, said through clenched teeth, “What is this crap? Have you lost it? What are you doing to yourself?”

“Are you talking about my writing?”

“What is this? Do you think this is good? Or are you trying to become ‘popular’?”

Joseph told him that he had a better piece coming out soon.

George said, “Joseph, I don’t know what to expect from you any more,” and sent him back into the history classroom.

The Letter of Recommendation, Part I

During Joseph’s senior year, the time came to send out applications to colleges. One college required written recommendations from two teachers. Joseph carried a recommendation form to his former Logic teacher, George Carmichael. “Mr. Carmichael, will you write a recommendation for me?”

“Let me see the form,” George said. Joseph handed it to him and stood back. George held the blank form before his face for ten solid seconds, staring at it, without saying a word. George then asked, “Morandi, were you accepted into the Honors Society a few months ago?”

Joseph said, “No.”

Then, George let the recommendation form drop from his hand into the wastebasket near his desk. Joseph’s jaw dropped, and he gasped.

George let another ten seconds pass, before he laughed, lifted the form out of his wastebasket, and said, “Morandi, I’ve waited years to see that expression on your face.” George then agreed to write a recommendation for Joseph. This now worried Joseph.

“Mr. Carmichael?”

“Yes?”

“You were on the Honors Society election committee, weren’t you?”

“Yes.” George stared at Joseph, expressionless, for another long pause. “Joseph, I voted in your favor.”

The Letter of Recommendation, Part II

Over a year had passed since the wastebasket incident, and since Joseph's high school graduation. A freshman in his chosen university, Joseph was seated face-to-face with a new university advisor in his advisor's office. "So," said the advisor, "you are Joseph Morandi. I've been waiting to meet you."

"You have been?"

Joseph's new advisor opened a file, and pulled out a recommendation form, covered with small, tidy letters. "Joseph, I don't often find things like this in a student's file." His advisor read, 'Joseph writes satire, and is developing his own voice. In a few years, he could write as well as Art Buchwald. Art Buchwald was George's favorite political satirist. If he finds confidence, however, he could be the next Hemmingway.'

Dedicated to George Entwistle, a great man and a great teacher.