Mr. Todd

The last time I saw Mr. Todd, my high school senior honors English teacher, I was home on Christmas break, 1969, from Oberlin College. I dropped by his house on impulse, pushed the doorbell button, and was greeted by his weathered, complex, expressive face. Bald, short, a squarish trunk atop spindly legs, he possessed a smile that began at the crinkles in the corners of his eyes, mixing, as it lit his features, welcome and sadness and mischief in equal measure. One never knew which emotion would dominate the conversation.

Today he led me into the living room, which was empty, except for the towering portrait of his sixth and current wife. Heir to a Texas oil fortune, she gazed confidently forward, well over our heads, hands in her lap, in a full-length blue satin gown. He motioned me to sit with him in the middle of the room on the pale green carpet.

He had sold the house, he said, and was taking her to Tijuana, for lamb’s-blood injections, to cure her of her lethargy.

I didn't question or challenge this. I still considered Mr. Todd, if eccentric, something of a genius. I never saw the woman, though I'd visited their house as a high school senior several times. He would serve me and one or two other honored students cocktails on the patio by the pool, and we’d discuss art and politics, practicing the life of the mind, interweaving Eisenhower and Auden, the Beatles and General MacArthur, into an always unpredictable tapestry of thought. I treasured each moment, struggling at times to keep up with the shifts and turns of conversation.
Having never met his wife, I couldn’t help wondering as we sat now in the empty room if she wasn’t perhaps a fiction: did he mean to take an actual human to Mexico, or this painting?

Till my last year in high school, I’d found ways to dodge honors English classes. Before my annual advising appointment, I’d outwit my counselor by creating deliberate conflicts in my schedule that would exclude the honors section, a class I was repeatedly urged to join. The fact was, I was terrified of competition in an English class. Since grade school, I’d been intensely competitive in the classroom, even with my closest friends. But writing and literature already meant too much to me in a way different from other subjects to risk comparison with outstanding students. A’s were easy in my regular English classes. Not till Mr. Todd, a town legend for his spirited lectures and flamboyant nature, did I take the chance. His class I’d looked forward to for years.

My relationship to him was not without its complications. The first day of class, before the bell rang, he called me to his desk at the head of the room and pointed to the roster of names. “Too many girls,” he said, “too many girls. Nothing was ever accomplished by women.” His words so stunned me, I walked to my seat feeling dizzy, only half-believing I’d heard what I’d heard. I felt somehow shamed by being the one he had confided in. I didn’t know how to tell my parents, or even close friends. During my first weeks in class, I watched for a sign of cruelty or favoritism that might confirm such utter misogyny. Detecting none, I did my best to set the remark aside.

Another incident, which occurred much later, illustrates how confusing his behavior could sometimes be. Close to final exams at the end of the year, the usual distances between student and teacher relaxing for those of us about to graduate, Mr. Todd and I sat down to lunch across from campus at the Burger King. This was novel, a meal in a high school hangout with a teacher. As we started to eat, he launched into a disquisition upon the impossibility of two
men ever “succeeding together.” I remember those words exactly. He hadn’t used the word*homosexual* or *gay* once, but I felt certain, several years before I had a conscious inkling of my own true sexual nature, that he was trying to warn me away from something dreadful. And then he handed me a small paper bag: “Here, you might be able to use these.”

That year he had given me books in much the same fashion, books that had made me think in important new ways—Hesse’s *Steppenwolf*, Kafka’s *The Trial*. Even so, I approached the bag with a peculiar anxiety and didn’t open it till I was home alone in my room. Inside were several pairs of sheer, pastel, nylon, men’s bikini underwear.

The sight of the see-through underwear made me instantly, inexplicably, nauseous. I brooded several days before going to his house. Instead of confronting him over what a gift of such underwear might signify, I simply handed them back, explaining they weren’t my size.

To this day his actions puzzle me. I understand my nausea now—simple fear, my body’s automatic response to the truth of what he saw in me, something I hadn’t yet consciously acknowledged to myself. But why warn me off from being queer, then give me a present that could only, to my unformed sensibility, represent queerness? Was this a test?

These flashes of eccentricity were painful for me. How reconcile them—and the feelings they called up—with my gratitude for the genius of his teaching, teaching that had introduced me to writing as art?

Two assignments from that year I remember as especially significant. Early in the spring semester he announced that Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” was the greatest lyric written in the English language. We were going to study its every word and comma. We were going to memorize and analyze and finally perform this masterpiece, as though it had been written for the stage centuries
earlier. We would do it as the ancient Greeks might have, with a chorus, sweeping strophe and counterstrophe, stage left to right, and right to left, in imitation of the poem/ocean rhythms:

\[\text{the grating roar}\]

\[\text{Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,}\]
\[\text{At their return, up the high strand,}\]
\[\text{Begin, and cease, and then again begin,}\]
\[\text{With tremulous cadence slow...}\]

In Greek costume, togas and sandals and wreaths on our heads, we staged the poem beneath a magnificent mulberry off the lunchroom courtyard. One student perched on a branch with a flute to accompany the chorus. Mr. Todd directed with a tambourine. The main solo speaking part was taken by a male student whose voice had entered the adult register, a tall, black-haired, skinny young man with a truly impressive bass. Other English classes that met during our hour were invited as audience.

Aspects of the performance were certainly corny enough—the dress, the grand declamatory style. But measuring our movements to the rhythms of the poem, allowing the music of the lines to enter our muscles, taught us that in poetry, form and content were not so distinguishable as we might have thought. That Arnold created the rhythms of those lines intentionally to give the reader's ear the feel of waves breaking on the shore, that this formal consideration helped produce the power of the poem's meaning, was a revelation.

Shortly after our performance, Mr. Todd stormed out of class. He accused us of laziness, which he called our collective case of senioritis; he would not waste his time teaching young people so utterly lost in indolence. Someone was hired to fill in for him the two weeks that he stayed away.

The year's first assignment had been even more important to
me personally. Mr. Todd asked that we look into our lives for patterns, for the inevitable repetitions. It might be a dream that recurred since childhood, a ritual family celebration, a behavior we saw running through several generations—the subject was essentially open, as long as it demonstrated the theme of repetition.

I knew at once I'd write about my death-terror exorcism, the cycle of chants and body postures and images I created as a child—and still resorted to—in coping with my terror of blank infinity. Not believing in God or heaven, I had a powerful dread of death. For days I struggled to convey the experience in prose, breaking the ritual into paragraphs. I even forced myself to think about death, to grow almost dizzy with fear, as I always did when confronted with oblivion, performing the ritual yet again as a form of research. But nothing I tried on paper succeeded in embodying the obsessive quality of the pattern.

Late on the night before the assignment was due, still frustrated with the essay, which I typed and retyped, hoping the activity might produce some inspiration, I made a momentous decision: I'd disobey the assignment. I knew that Mr. Todd had an explosive disposition, and I was desperate to please him. But the subject demanded a different treatment; the subject demanded I write it as a poem.

And so I began to break apart the paragraphs, working with phrases, cutting explanatory passages, isolating images and important actions. I finally abandoned the left margin, scattering the resulting lines in an e. e. cummings pattern on the pages. All night I pared and revised, working to match the experience to the verbal—and visual—presentation.

I'm sure I trembled as I turned it in. Mr. Todd's response the next week when he returned our papers was shocking. Pacing the room excitedly, arms in the air, he proclaimed me "the child of Mnemosyne," Memory, mother of the muses; I was, he said, "a poet, a true poet." Sitting, finally, at his desk, he commanded me to stand
on a small wooden box at the center of the class to perform my work.

Our desks were arranged in a large open rectangle that ran around the outer edges of the room. This way we always faced each other, which made for better discussion. The rectangle was unbroken except at the head of the class, where Mr. Todd's larger desk was positioned.

I paused in my seat, unable to believe the moment was real. Then I took what seemed like a very long walk along the outside of the rectangle to the opening by Mr. Todd. Pivoting toward the center of the floor, I stepped up onto the fruit crate and began to read.