

To Teach is no Peach

It was early September when Miss Felicia Alison received the letter that would change her life. She had just finished her degree in History. It was an old dream of hers, to be an history teacher and she had pursued it but always very aware that it would be a very difficult dream. Teaching history isn't a very sought after profession, still, she decided to go forth with it. And now, it was done, at least the first step. The letter was from a university, and like so many that she had opened before, she wasn't very hopeful of its content. However, this one started very differently. Its first paragraph wasn't an apology, followed by some excuse like 'we aren't hiring right now' and finishing brilliantly with 'we will keep you on our system'. She was always afraid of what that meant, probably a job market blacklist, because none of her friends, especially older ones, that had ever received that very special sentence, ever got a job in that area. Yes, this letter was different, it just said:

Dear Professor Felicia Alison,

You start teaching next Wednesday.

Regards,

The University Chancellor,

Finishing with a very indistinguishable signature. She thought she would be over the rainbow about her first job offer, but the truth was she was very apprehensive. First, because of that weird letter and second because she didn't recall sending any *curriculum* there. Finally, she couldn't find anything online about that university. It wasn't on the public schools list, so it meant it had to be a private one. She decided to go, after all, how bad could it be?

It was the 'next Wednesday' and the little red haired Felicia drove off to campus very early, luckily she didn't throw away the envelope, otherwise, it would have been a very difficult task, finding that university; she was wearing her best dress, very simple yet formal, which made her look very pretty, but still very professional. Also she decided to put her mother's pearl earrings on, for good luck. As soon as she got there,

she was delighted, students and teachers arriving on bicycles, a huge and well-kept garden with several types of roses. Her nervous state gave away to a happier one as she entered the main building. There she was, in a big hall full of televisions on the wall and all of them showing 'The best University. Join us now' in a horrible red font. She was waiting to be attended by the receptionist. Finally it was her turn, the receptionist was a young girl, about the same age as her, but a bit more plump and with a very grave cigarette burnt voice.

'Hello dear.'

Felicia was caught off guard, it was like if her late grandmother had possessed a young girl and was speaking to her.

'Err... Hello there. I got a letter saying I start working here today.'

'Ah, name please.'

'Felicia Alison. Just one L.'

The receptionist put her reading glasses and started looking at a list.

'There you are.' She pointed.

Felicia smiled. 'Yes, here I am.'

'No, no dear, *here*.' The receptionist showed her the list, pointing to her name.

She forced herself to smile again, as a shiver crept down her spine. It *was* like talking to her grandmother.

'What do I do now?'

'You have to report to the Chancellor. He will instruct you, fifth floor, last door on the left.'

'Thank you.'

'Not a problem dear,' she coughed heavily. 'Good luck, dear.'

After that spooky encounter, she was now entering the Chancellor's office. The Chancellor was smaller than Felicia, which is the same as saying, he can't ride any rollercoaster, at least legally. He was wearing an all-white suit and his desk was impeccably clean and tidy, with only a fish bowl, with a betta fish in it, a world map and a name plate, 'A. Yamamoto'.

'Hello, I'm so happy you've decided to come work with us.'

She was expecting a very thick Japanese accent from him, but his English was perfect, probably even better than hers.

'Hello, Chancellor. I too am happy to have the opportunity to work with this...' she made the shortest pause, 'unique university, sir.'

He stood up, which, strangely, even made him look shorter and moved next to her and said. 'Let me show you around.'

After several long minutes of introducing several boring professors and by boring I mean people who have to say everything they have done, every prize they've won, including those that most people would be ashamed of showing. Something like 'Everybody Gets a Trophy Race Even if You Finished the Day Afterwards' kind of trophy. They moved on and Yamamoto was going to show her the university's library next. As they were opening the glass door, a young man in black clothes was screaming. '*Vive la résistance*' and being dragged by two very tall and skinny blonde (and very annoyed) librarians.

'We do this every-day, why can't you understand?' said one of the librarians.

'It's ridiculous!' replied the young man, furious, shaking his clothes either for more dramatic effect or to get rid of imaginary wrinkles. Yamamoto turned to Felicia. 'Of course, there is always a black sheep.' he smiled shyly.

'I'm no black sheep, although, the irony is noted,' he looked at his clothes, 'your nincompoop employees and their fascist library rules are the true black sheep.' he interrupted his speech and looked at Felicia. 'New teacher, hun? A little advice, run away!'

'Run away?'

'SILENCE!' one of the librarians shouted.

'I'm sorry for Mr. Gilbert, he has Turret's and Mr. James Edwards, here,' pointing to the young man, 'is overreacting. Come Miss Alison; let me show you your office.'

'I have my own office?' she was surprised.

'SILENCE!'

'C'mon Gilbert, give us a break.'

'SILENCE... SILENCE!' jolting as he spoke.

'Goodbye Gilbert, thank you.'

'Yes, madam. Your own office. At the expense of your soul. Run away, don't sign the contract, don't be a fool!' James took a greyish old pocket watch and a bit alarmed said, 'Oh, I'm late, I'm very late indeed.' And he ran away, literally.

'Don't mind his nonsenses Miss Felicia, let's go and see your offi-' Mr Yamamoto didn't finish his sentence, for Felicia decided to go into the library. The Chancellor went after her, but she had already seen the chaos that had been installed.

Above every computer the words, in black, '*Vive la résistance*' were stenciled over the library rules. And in every computer's search engine there had been entered inquiries like 'dumbass librarians' and 'okay to look up porn but horribly wrong to work on a thesis'.

'Let the students work...' she read aloud from one of the computer's monitor.

'Well, young James doesn't like our rules. Especially, the one regarding the division of the work stations. We have one for searching online and the other for work purposes.' the Chancellor said.

'Well, that makes sense.'

'Right! Doesn't it?' Mr Yamamoto was pleased that Felicia agreed with him, and Felicia was pleased that his future employer didn't seem to possess any sarcasm skills. A faraway 'silence' was heard in the background, and they left the library.

After a bit more of sightseeing, Mr Yamamoto had to leave, apparently something about his betta fish being angry if not fed on time. And there she was, alone in the university campus. She bought a tuna sandwich and sat in the gardens, enjoying her meal and thinking about that particularly weird morning.

'Mind if I join?' a voice interrupted her lunch. It was a familiar voice, a very recent familiar voice. James was holding two glasses of juice and looking at Felicia. Her mouth full. She chew hastily to respond.

'Yes, please, sit down. Jessie, was it?'

'Close, but I think you know my name is James.' he gave her one of the glasses. They both smiled.

'So, tell me Mr James, why did you do that?' she took a gulp of the juice, 'hmm, quite weird, but good, weird but good.' She was talking about her juice.

'Because this university needs to see how ridiculous and bad it is. People need to wake up.'

Felicia didn't say anything for a while, and took another bite at her sandwich. James took a sip of his drink, looking at the sky, it was a bit cloudy.

'I like clouds.' he added, absent minded.

'And why haven't you been expelled and better yet, why haven't you quit?'

He laughed really hard.

'My dear Professor...' he made a pause.

'Felicia, just Felicia.'

‘Felicia, first they can’t expel me, my father makes big donations every year, so they don’t have the guts. And quitting? Never!’ he was now speaking passionately. ‘I can’t quit this war. It’s like quitting your rights.’ And he continued, a bit more calm now, ‘not as if you would understand.’

‘Perhaps, better than you think, I’m a History Professor.’

He smiled and, again, took out his pocket watch, ‘I’m not late yet, come, I’ll show you the *real* university. What I’m fighting against.’ he took her hand and started running towards another building, one that Chancellor Yamamoto hadn’t showed her. They entered, and they started walking along a corridor until they reached room 3.14. ‘This is the physics room, also known as the Pi room.’

‘Pie?’ Felicia looked and saw a blackboard full of equations and formulas, and all alone, reading a notebook, was a very well dressed gentleman, the physics professor.

‘Watch this.’

‘Professor Charles, why is there more matter than antimatter in the universe?’

The physics professor took his eyes off his notebook and very plainly answered him ‘that’s a very good question.’ and continued reading his notebook. Felicia and James stood there, by the entrance of the room, in silence, waiting for something more. James winked at her and started talking again to the professor.

‘Is that a mistake I see in that integral?’

He jumped off his chair and started gazing at the blackboard.

‘Be ready to run, he really hates this.’ James said to Felicia.

‘What-’

James turned the lights off and the professor started to glow in a bright green. Felicia widened her eyes, she was in awe, but before she could do or say anything, James grabbed her by the hand. They ran away only to be pursued by a ‘JAMES!’ shouted from the classroom.

They stopped by another room, a very cold and low lit room. Felicia was trying to catch her breath. She left her home that morning for a teaching job, and by lunch hour she was running from another teacher, like a little brat. However she didn’t feel bad, she felt excited. When she caught her breath, she realized she was in a server farm, with lots of cardboard boxes on the floor.

‘What’s this?’ she asked.

‘It’s the faculty’s supercomputer. One hundred million dollars and a couple of teachers fired, the good ones, sadly, for that.’

‘I didn’t know we had a supercomputer!’

‘We?’ James asked worried, grabbing Felicia. ‘Don’t tell me they’ve already got you.’

‘No. Just a matter of speaking.’ she said very coyly and embarrassed.

‘I guess you have a very large research group, then.’

James cackled, and in that cold dark room, Felicia felt a little fear.

‘A large research group? No, no, no... We don’t have *any* research group, or research individual for that matt-’

‘So, what’s this for?’

‘Playing solitaire.’

‘Playing solitaire? A hundred million dollars supercomputer to play solitaire?’

Felicia was in shock. She had been brought up, mostly by her grandmother, saying that wasting anything was almost a sin.

‘And the occasional minesweeper.’ he laughed again.

‘But who?’

James grabbed her hand and showed her, behind the door, a sign-up sheet for the supercomputer, and every day, for every hour there it was, his name. ‘Mr. AL.’ It written in blue, and once or twice in red, markers.

‘Who’s Mr. Al?’

‘Well... for some, a myth, for others, a legend. For me? Just a bad employee. The root of evil, the cause of our decadency.’ James was again speaking very passionately and Felicia giggled without realizing it.

‘Let us explore further his *lair*.’ He started running again, along the long corridor that harbored the massive processors units. At the end of the corridor, they saw a man, wearing an all-white uniform, moving boxes from one position to another. At first Felicia thought it was the Chancellor and she felt guilty for wandering there. The feeling vanished as James said. ‘Look. It’s Mr. Al. It’s said that he once did this for over 48 hours,’ he was whispering, ‘but that’s just a rumor. Also part of the myth is that he was a failed magician, specialized in fire tricks until one day his act went completely ablaze, if you get my drift.’

‘Oh, poor fellow.’

‘Don’t say that. As soon as we turn our backs, he magically disappears and immediately starts playing solitaire.’

Seeing the seriousness in his face Felicia didn’t laugh. ‘Really?’

‘Yes...,’ he paused, ‘and, of course, the occasional minesweeper. But rumors, also say he isn’t that good in that one.

‘Ohh...’

They stood there for quite some time, watching that man going from left to right, with boxes. The silence was only broken by the tic-tac of James’s silvery watch.

‘What’s in the boxes?’ Felicia finally asked.

‘Empty!’ he looked at his watch and grabbed Felicia by the hand and started running away, from the man known as Mr. Al. ‘Come, or we’ll be late.’

‘For what?’

‘For a very important *au fait*.’

‘What?’

‘A class, a class. Come!’ and James hurried Felicia out of the supercomputer lab. The more they ran, the weirder the faculty looked. More somber and empty. Felicia felt at loss, she had gone through a maze of corridors, spiral stairs, both up and down, it seemed as if she had been running all day long. This was accentuated by the lack of windows which barred the sunlight from coming in and giving a twisted notion of time for her. They reached a double door, it looked like an emergency door, but she had difficulty in discerning it in that low light.

‘Wait here a couple of minutes.’ said James, handing her his flashlight. He disappeared in the dark. He wasn’t away for a long time. ‘Where did he get all of that?’ she thought. James was carrying a foldable table and chairs and a picnic basket with cake, a kettle with hot tea and sugar lumps for the tea. He set up the table as quick as it was humanely possible, and asked Felicia to join him.

‘We have to hurry, but there is always time for cake and tea.’

‘Why do we have to hurry?’ asked Felicia, while taking a small bite of the chocolate cake.

James took his pocket watch again and looked at it. ‘Well, we have to hurry, if we want to catch the opening *lesson*,’ he fingered quoted the ‘lesson’, ‘it’s taught by Professor Louis Mateo, head of the literature department,’ he paused, served some tea for himself and Felicia. ‘One or two?’

‘Sorry?’

‘Sugar lumps. One or two?’

‘Oh, two please.’ she smiled.

As she was going to drink her tea, James stood up, grabbed her again, and said ‘It is time.’ He opened the door next to them. They were in the technical booth of the university’s main lecture room and below them, hundreds of students and teachers. The later all wearing red and black colored uniforms and large bizarre hats.

‘Hello J!’ said a voice from a dark corner. Felicia jumped, she hadn’t noticed that little man.

‘Hello Matthew. This is Felicia.’

‘I know!’ he snickered, ‘and I’m not very fond of new people, you know that.’

‘Indeed I do, indeed I do, but she’s one of the intelligent ones.’ James replied. Felicia didn’t like that they were discussing her, right in front of her. She remained in silence, looking at the small man, with a black top hat, fingerless gloves and a two day beard.

‘This is Profess—’

‘Ex.’

‘Ex-Professor Matthew Hart. He was sacked because he flunked students.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’ asked Felicia.

‘For us? Nothing! For the Chancellor and the students’ daddies, it’s almost a crime. The bigger their donations, the bigger the crime.’

‘Look,’ James pointed to Professor Louis down below, ‘he’s about to start.’ he said to Felicia. Professor Louis was the only teacher not wearing those silly uniforms. He was wearing a scarf, and although Felicia was faraway, she could tell that all the front rows were occupied, either by the red and yellow hats or by girls. He was that kind of university teacher. The one that every girl had a crush on. He was elegant and always wore a scarf, no matter what the weather was outside. He started to talk and you could almost see the ‘ah’ and the girly ‘sighs’ floating in the classroom, like cartoon speech balloons.

‘It has begun,’ said Mathew solemnly, ‘and so, shall we.’

‘What?’ asked Felicia.

‘We are going to serve revenge, my dear Felicia.’

‘Revenge?’

The scruffy looking short man stood up and yelled ‘off with their heads!’

Felicia panicked and looked at James in pleading eyes, and he just laughed.

‘Don’t worry,’ he finally manage to speak, ‘he’s just talking about the gummy bears. He always eats their heads first.’

Felicia looked at Mathew holding a small bag full of green, red, and yellow gummy bears and he was chewing their heads and saving their bodies.

‘Just watch,’ James smiled, ‘hit it Matt.’

Felicia was looking at Professor Louis. He was speaking and waving his hand. Moving around. Everyone was following his movements, always attentive, a true TED talker. When all of a sudden his speech went from ‘just like Shakespeare’s Hamlet...’ to a medley of operas: ‘O Fortuna’, ‘The Ride of the Valkyries’, amongst others.

James and Mathew couldn’t stop laughing, Felicia was still confused, she didn’t know what had happened. James decided to help her out.

‘Professor Louis has a very girlish voice, which he is very embarrassed of. Every semester he tells,’ he coughed and corrected, ‘he plays a tape to his students saying that they should not interrupt him, any questions should be made over email or through his assistant.’

‘He playbacks his lessons?’ Felicia was incredulous.

‘Indeed he does, indeed he does.’

‘Ahh, off with his head!’ howled Matthew while chewing off another head, from a red gummy bear.

The show carried on, from operas, to Martin Luther speeches, even a whale song. Louis felt horribly and started screeching ‘stop it, stop it!’ and that was it, the last drop. Everybody exploded in a unison laughing spree, even the girls.

James took out his watch and for the last time he grabbed Felicia by the arm and ran, it was a short run. There they were, again, in the exact same bench where James found Felicia having lunch. He left her there, no kisses, no goodbyes, he just left. Felicia didn’t seem to mind, she was thinking about what she had seen that day, thinking and thinking until Chancellor Yamamoto joined her.

‘Come Miss Felicia, we have your contract to discuss.’

Shortly after they entered Yamamoto’s office, he was bidding her to have a seat, and so she did. The office looked exactly the same, with the exception of a battleship board game on the table and the fish.

‘What happened to it?’ Felicia asked pointing to the fish buoying upside down in the aquarium.

‘He died fighting... like a true warrior.’

‘But...’ she hesitated, ‘doesn’t he need another betta fish to fight against?’

‘Don’t be silly, *I* fought him, and he valiantly lost.’

This was one of those situations where Felicia was glad she wasn't having a drink, otherwise, she would have made a Pollock masterpiece out of Yamamoto's white suit with her beverage.

'Sorry! *You* fought the fish?'

'YES! It was an honorable battle, and the best man,' he corrected, 'the best chordate won.'

'Here's your contract, please, do sign it. It would be a pleasure if you could work with us.' The Chancellor smiled and gave her a contract of biblical proportions, biblical in terms of size and the ten plagues, for there were worse points in that contract than there were plagues. Felicia went to the last page, grabbed a pen and wrote in a very fancy handwriting:

Alice Lindel

She turned over the contract to the Chancellor, excused herself and went straight to the door, but was interrupted.

'I'm sorry Felicia.'

She froze.

'I forgot one important thing before you leave.'

She sighed of relief.

'Give me a letter and a number.'

'Sorry?'

'A letter, A to L, and a number, 1 to 10.'

'E3?' she said, asking, more than affirming.

'Rats! You sank my battleship!'

Felicia left the office and the campus, and never looked back. And until today, there's a girl named Alice Lindel on the university's payroll.