

# **INDEPENDENT STUDY**

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Chip Saunders stood awkwardly in the open door to the office. There was only the light from a single lamp on his professor's desk. Her face hovered above the pool of light illuminating the papers in front of her. He tapped on the door jam. She looked up. Her face glowed pink and gold.

"Oh, you're right on time, Mr. Saunders. There's a coat rack to your left."

He stuffed his gloves into his pockets and took off his heavy jacket and his hat. The flaps were down because of the Chicago winter weather. As he hung everything, he reflected on how much he hated getting layered up to go outside, and how much he would have loved these winter things last winter in France. Then he stood in front of the desk, holding his three-ringed binder in his left arm against his hip. He shifted his weight from foot to foot while he waited for her to tell him what the meeting was about.

Professor Lipton smiled, "There's no need to look so worried, Mr. Saunders. You're not in trouble."

He smiled warily. Her light auburn hair softly framed her face. Her blue eyes were large and dark in the light. His uneasiness seemed out of place, but he could not shake it. His senses stretched to examine his professor and her office, seeking the source of his apprehension. It was a small room, decorated in warm earth tones. There were prints of European scenes on the wall. He recognized a Paris street. There was a small couch against a wall and two padded chairs near the desk. Wooden file cabinets stood behind the desk. The single lamp left the corners of the room dark and indistinct.

"I've been rereading your poems. They are exquisite. You should be very proud of them."

"Thank you, professor."

"I took the liberty of showing them to the department head and a couple of the other professors. Everyone agrees that you have a rare talent."

The 28 year old freshman waited nervously. *I should be pleased*, he mused. *Why does it feel wrong?*

The professor of his English Comp. 101 class said warmly, "Would you be interested in an independent study project?"

"What would that mean, Professor Lipton?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, you would write poems under the supervision of a professor and get credit for it."

"I'm pretty busy, ma'am, I don't think I could take on any additional classes or projects."

"You don't understand--this would replace the English class that you are taking now."

"How often would we have to meet?"

"Probably once a week for two or three hours. It would all depend on how much you write and how much revision is needed."

"That's better than coming to class twice a week."

"You don't like my class?"

"That's not fair. You know that's not what I meant."

She smiled an apology. She had dimples. The light showed them to the best advantage.

"I like the class okay. The discussions can get a little silly, though." He remembered an officious young woman going on and on about Reality and the Meaning of Truth. The other veterans who sat with him in the back of the room had exchanged smiles and eye rolls. "It's really a matter of time. I've got two part time jobs and five classes, so ..." He paused trying to work out what he really wanted to say. "If it means less homework, I'm interested. I have to write the poems anyway."

"I'm glad to hear that," she commended, pleased that he was artistically driven. She tilted her head slightly. "Why don't you sit down, Mr. Saunders. You look terribly awkward standing there."

He pulled up a chair and gingerly sat on the edge. Something still bothered him. He hadn't figured it out, but he had learned to listen to his gut. His subconscious often put things together faster than his conscious mind could. He simply felt unsafe in that office.

"We sent your first three poems to a poetry journal. We wanted to test the waters so to speak."

"Test them for what?"

"To see what kind of a reception they would get. This journal is *The Poetry Nook*. It is a small, monthly publication. They don't pay anything, but the commercial publishers who do pay read it carefully to find new talent. *The Nook* accepted all three sonnets." She smiled broadly and waited for his reaction.

Once more, he waited; his face remained neutral. He had learned that if one had patience, circumstances might provide more options and increase the chances of survival. He shook off the thought.

"Mr. Saunders, this is very unusual. We're very excited."

"I guess I'm glad, then."

She laughed. It was a deep, almost provocative sound. It raised the hairs on the back of his neck slightly.

"Do you have any preferences as to your supervising professor? I had thought you might work with me. After all, I know your work, and I believe I have come to know you through it." Again, she tilted her head ever so slightly. The light from the lamp made her short wavy hair gleam. Her fingers caressed the papers casually.

"I don't know any of the other English professors, ma'am."

"Please don't 'ma'am' me, Mr. Saunders. We're not that far apart in age. If I do help you with your writing, we'll be working quite closely, more like colleagues than professor and student. You could call me Ellen. Could I call you Chip? I've heard a couple of the students address you as such rather than Charles."

There it was, at last, like a giant hole in the middle of the floor. Chip suddenly noticed that she had changed her blouse since that morning's class—this one was softer and cut much lower. She wore more make up, too, and the lighting—who keeps only one lamp on in an office?

He could hear Kirby's cackle in the back of his mind: "Sarge, you're going to see your professor on a Friday evening? And she's a widow? Listen, she's got more than your classroom performance on her mind, you lucky dog!"

Saunders had glared at his friend at the time, certain that couldn't be the case. Now he thought, *For once, Kirby was right*. Chip closed his eyes for a minute because the feeling of controlled panic threatened to overwhelm him. He was in a mine field and knew that any way he stepped, he would probably blow something up. There was nothing else for it, though. Even if he had found her attractive and could overcome the prohibitions against professor-student dating, Saunders was simply incapable of infidelity. Kirby was comfortable ribbing his ex-sergeant because he knew this, too.

Saunders opened his eyes, looked right at his professor, and stepped bravely. He shifted his binder so that she could easily see his left hand. The gold band shone brightly in the light. He took a deep breath and began, "Professor, I'd rather keep things more formal." He looked away for a moment, and then faced her again. "Maybe I'm reading this wrong, and if I am, I apologize, but, well, uh..." Then in a rush, "I get the impression that you're asking for something I'm not able to give."

The woman looked slightly puzzled, but said nothing.

He wiggled his left hand slightly. "I'm married. I'm very happily married."

Now, she looked bewildered. "I don't understand. I thought you were a widower."

"No, ma'am."

She flinched slightly at his continued use of the term and the finality of his delivery, but said nothing.

Saunders asked, "What on earth would give you that idea? I've said nothing about my personal life in class."

"One of the other students said your wife worked in a hospital, and, well..." She shuffled through the papers on her desk.

He recognized them as the copies of his sonnets.

"This poem here...it's a description of your wife's death, isn't it?" She slid one paper across the desk.

He leaned over, trying to see the papers without getting any closer to her than he had to. He picked up the poem in question.

"It's about a young life, cut off too soon, a medical career that would never happen..." Her voice trailed off.

"Professor, that poem is about a twelve year old French girl who wanted to be a nurse. She saved my life and the life of one of my men. Then she tripped a mine and died." Saunders immediately regretted the harshness of the description. Even now, remembering that day tightened his chest.

Professor Lipton's face paled. The rouge on her cheeks and lips stood out cruelly in the light. She looked slightly ill.

Saunders' heart went out to her. *Life's painful enough*, he reflected. He hated to add to it. He had to, however, even if it meant losing this opportunity. He couldn't accept it with these kinds of strings. The blond man reached over and shuffled the papers around on her desk. He pulled one sonnet out and slid it over to her. "This one is about my wife."

She took the paper and skimmed it. Her face broke. She looked about to cry, but she breathed slowly through her nose and bit her lip, saying nothing until she had control. "I...uh...thought this poem was about m...about someone else. It is about starting anew, reaching...."

He smiled gently. "Not exactly. I was trying to decide whether to wake her up. I'd had a bad dream and needed some comforting. She'd had a hard day and needed sleep, and, well, that's what it's about. I kept it vague because you said poems should leave room for interpretation."

Professor Lipton smiled ruefully. He was right. The poem was better because the reader had to bring something to it. It was so lovely. She had memorized several of the lines. The images were slightly erotic and full of love and longing. "Did you wake her?"

"No, I turned the nightmare into a poem. You know your poetry assignment? It was due the next day. Actually, I turned it into more than one. It took a large part of the night."

"The sonnets about the dying soldier? Billy?"

He nodded.

She shook her head as the shreds of schemes and plans swirled in her head, and then settled on an imaginary trash heap.

"I'll understand, ma'am, if this means that the independent study isn't going to happen."

The educator sat up straight, truly offended. "Mr. Saunders, my misinterpretations of your work only mean that I should not be your supervising professor--that is painfully obvious. The quality of your writing has not changed." She chewed the inside of her cheek, thinking very hard for a few moments. Then she continued, "Kevin Kreidler was quite impressed with your work." She looked up, determined and professional. It made an odd contrast with her make up—the pallor of her skin rendered her lips and cheeks clown like. She had aged in the last few minutes. Her eyes were dark and tragic.

Saunders looked down, embarrassed to see her struggling. He ran his right hand through his hair, and shifted his weight again as he wondered how he could exit gracefully, without inflicting any more pain.

"Professor Kreidler was in north Africa."

He looked up, suddenly interested.

"He was very moved by your first poem. He said it felt true. He also liked the one about the lieutenant who was injured. He wanted to know whether he would be more upset about losing the arm or having his face scarred so badly."

"I don't know. He's still working that out."

"He was real, too?"

"Yes. He was...is...a friend."

"Well, Professor Kreidler lost his leg in Tunisia and returned about three years ago." She brightened. "He usually works late. Let me call his office and see if he's still here. If he is, you can meet him tonight and work out details. I know he will want to change your schedule for this semester. There are far too many math courses."

*Uh, oh*, thought Saunders, *This is not your night at all, Professor*. Out loud, he cleared his throat and said, "Ma'am?"

She stopped dialing and looked at him, eyebrows raised.

"I don't need my schedule changed. I like math. I want to major in it." He smiled ironically, "I want to be a mathematician when I grow up."

"But what about the writing?"

"I'll keep writing. I have to."

"Yes, but don't you want to learn more literature? Explore different styles...other poetic forms?"

"No, Professor, I don't. I read a lot on my own, and I don't want to have to write a lot of papers about it. Anyway, the sonnet is perfect for me: it's large enough to hold an entire image or story. It's small enough that it's a little puzzle. I have to get the meter, the rhyme, and the words exactly right. I don't write as a creative outlet. I do proofs for that."

"Well, why do you write, then?"

"For the nightmares. I was having trouble sleeping. Things I'd packed away in order to get through the War kept coming out. I have recurrent nightmares that often keep me awake. But when I

work one into verse, I have to examine it and understand why it's important. I twist it around until it fits in the poem." He smiled apologetically and shrugged. "Once I do that, the nightmare doesn't come back. I sleep better."

During his explanation, disbelief grew in her face. When he finished, she started to giggle. Saunders became more concerned for the woman. It was disturbing.

"You mean that these little gems are merely **therapy**?"

He swallowed, and nodded. "Please, don't say 'merely.' I am **very** grateful to you. Writing these," He gestured at the papers on her desk, "Has kept me from going nuts."

She threw her head back and laughed. The color returned to her face, and she looked almost vibrant. After a few moments, she regained control. She noticed the distressed look on her soon-to-be ex-student's face. "Mr. Saunders, I guess I'm 0 for 3 tonight. Or is it 0 for 4? I've lost count. Let me dial Professor Kreidler and see if he's in."

Professor Lipton dialed a four digit number. Saunders looked around and located a light switch. He flipped it on, and the cozy, intimate room became an office.

"Hi, Kevin? Yes, he's here. ....Yes, you were right...I misinterpreted everything completely. ....Please don't laugh; it's been humiliating enough without an I-told-you-so." She listened, her face carefully neutral. "Can he come over to your office now? It would save him another trip, and," she looked at Saunders briefly, "He's got a busy schedule with two jobs, school and a wife." There was a longer silence. "Shall--" She tried to interrupt the man on the other end. "Shall--Shall I send him? Yes? Okay, he'll be over in a couple of minutes."

She looked at her would-be protégé. "You can go down the hall. It's room 16. You'll like him."

Saunders gathered his hat and coat and turned to say good-bye.

"It has been a revelation, Mr. Saunders."

"I'm s—"

"Don't say it. I don't need the pity. I set myself up for it, and I'll get over it. Anything you say will only make it worse."

He bowed slightly in farewell and left.

She stared at the door for a couple of minutes. Then, she scooped up the papers on her desk, and started to drop them in the waste basket. One phrase caught her eye, and she reread the poem. She leafed through the papers, shaking her head. Finally, she straightened the stack of papers by tapping it forcefully on the table. Then she placed the poems gently in the folder and filed it in her desk drawer.

The End