

A Most Successful Failure

By: R.A. Peterson

The Dean of Students, Sir Alden Chandler, removed his reading glasses and neatly tucked them within the breast pocket of his wool jacket. He laced his fingers together upon the large oak desk and adopted a smile that squirmed uncomfortably within the congress of grayed whiskers. "According to my records, you have applied to Cambridge ten times beforehand, Mr. Sullivan Sibbs."

"Selby," said the young man across from him.

"Pardon?"

"I hate my name. I go by Selby, not Sullivan."

The older man looked him over, forming his words slowly. "I see..."

"And yes, I very much want to attend this school."

"Good," his smile reformed, lips squirming like worms baking under the scorching sun. "Because you have passed the entry exam. Welcome to Cambridge University!"

Selby, with a smile that hardly expressed his excitement, shook the Dean's hand directly. "Thank you, sir."

"Talk to Miss Daube, my secretary, and she will arrange for you to have a tour of the campus, as well as find you a room."

Selby nodded, still bearing his constrained smile. Standing, Selby buttoned up his navy blazer and took up his travel bag. He walked back out of Sir Chandler's office and waited near the secretary's desk, where she was actively engaged on the Bell model 102 telephone.

Curiously, she glanced briefly at him before covering the mouthpiece with brightly manicured fingers of the same shade found throughout the entire aspect of her petite figure—the top of her red-shocked head, the soft touch of blush upon her cheeks and bright, pursed lips, to the plain red dress. "Can I help you?"

"I was told to talk with you about a tour and..." began Selby.

A quick and utterly pathetic attempt at a friendly smirk crossed her glossy lips. "Of course. One moment, please."

Several minutes passed as the receptionist talked with someone on the other line, until she hung up the mouthpiece abruptly. She glanced back up at Selby, who was waiting nearby. Gesturing with a manicured finger, the receptionist directed him toward her and then began to write something down on a scrap of paper.

"Here," she said holding out the scrap of paper. "This is the dorm you've been assigned. I'm sure you can find your way."

With a muted groan, Selby took up his things.

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"The name's John Heath." The younger man with bright blond hair stuck out his hand. "Welcome to the University, friend."

Selby nodded coolly as he set his travel bag down on the cot. "Does anyone else stay here?"

“No, sir, not in this dorm at least; just as it’s been for awhile now. Admissions for Churchill have been low of late, and so most of these dorms are only half full.”

John kept up the mostly one-sided conversation for nearly an hour as Selby unpacked, until he managed to excuse himself to the wash closet. Though he enjoyed his company and amiable nature, Selby was readily agitated by John’s talkative personality that seems to never have an end. It was only by the promise to join him in a friendly game of polo with several other students of Churchill College that Selby was able to quiet the man...

Two Weeks Later:

Selby’s punch, a blur of bloodied knuckles, made a large crack as it made contact with the other man’s jaw. He flexed his fingers and found they ached, and he would have guessed his own bones were the source of the sound was it not for Lucas Burkart writhing and screaming on the floor. Selby wiped the single dribble of blood from his cheek, wincing slightly as he brushed across a bruise—only minor wounds. The other combatant, however, was clearly worse for the wear: blood ran freely from his torn lip, and his jaw was most transfigured, visibly broken and hanging abnormally.

Selby shook out his bloodied fist, casually watching several of the onlookers leading Lucas to the school doctor. Grabbing his blazer from a black iron railing, Selby placed it under his arm and began to massage his aching hand. He watched his defeated nemesis for only a moment before beginning to walk back to his dorm.

He looked back at the sounding of his name to see John Heath jogging toward him. “What in God’s name were you thinking?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean?” John grabbed and held him back. “Selby, what’s going on? You can’t go around beating the bloody hell out of every spoiled brat that happens to offend you. The world’s full of them, especially here in Cambridge. You’ll wear yourself out. Besides that, there’s only so much they’re going to tolerate: your little tantrum in Dr. Adam’s class, always arguing with the other professors...”

“Not to mention my night out with Miss Daube. I’m sure it’s a night she won’t soon forget,” hinted Selby.

“That wasn’t funny. She could have been seriously injured.”

“I seriously doubt that, John.”

John met Selby’s stare intently. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why not? You really think people like them deserve any better? They’re just like my father; absolute fakes that put on pretty faces to whatever suits them. They all got what was coming to them.” Selby wiped the blood from his cheek again.

“I suppose that’s true,” said John in a troubled tone, as Selby began to walk away. “We all are subject to the natural law of sowing and reaping. Everyone will get what’s coming to them. And so you just helped that along, right?” He paused a moment. “What about you Selby? When are you going to get your just reward?”

Selby looked the younger man over for a frighteningly long moment before turning to walk away. Plenty came to mind, but nothing seemed appropriate to say. He may be a bitter man, but he knew when to hold his tongue. John's words touched him somehow. He wasn't ready to face his true self—he would delve further into his self-centered world, where no one or nothing else mattered. Absolutely nothing else.

Three Years Later:

Sullivan Sibbs II wasn't sure what he felt as he waited for the carriage to come pick him up. He had fought so hard to climb up the social hierarchy, out from the slums of his childhood and the long shadow of his father. He had fought, set his sights, and reached his goal. He had proven that a Sibbs was not beyond making a name for himself; his father, Sullivan Sibbs Sr., was no longer the dreaded future he would look to. Whether he'd been at all successful was still to be gathered. He hadn't been attending Cambridge University for a month before he'd been kicked out, and so was having difficulty deciding whether in fact he'd arrived victorious. He'd proven that he was a better man, he realized. That was good enough for him. He ran his fingers through his thinning Irish hair, and sighed purposefully. He couldn't help but allow a twisted grin to come around at the thought; he had indeed been a most successful failure.