

## Theology and Reality

By John Tavares

When my father was arrested I was seeking work in public relations or corporate communications, where, I believed I had the best prospects of success. A Rosedale neighbour and Bishop Strachan School classmate informed me Dylan Drummond had entered the newspaper business, where, I thought, he might help me make some useful connections or find a job. Meanwhile, I thought no bigger public relations assignment faced me than the task of assisting my father. Actually, he didn't need any help or want any help. He was quite content with his life as a doddering gentleman. Dr. Heaney-O'Hara's accomplishments, position, and place in life, as a professor of theology in the University of Toronto, in academia, might have made somebody else proud, smug, and self-satisfied, but Dad admitted to me he was embarrassed by the academic profession. Although he never attended Rosedale and Forest Hill neighbourhood parties, even when my mother, who refused to dinner engagements at a restaurant or neighbours' or friends' houses and insisted on cooking all the family meals, was alive, he felt humbled: He couldn't brag to guests at a cocktail party he was a stockbroker, bond trader, mining engineer, or prospector like his father or grandparents.

Meanwhile, I had become, a friend joked, a bankrupt pretty young thing, with a trust fund. I failed in the world of small business, when my yoga studio and fitness gym accumulated so many losses, so much debt, and I personally owed so much money, I was forced to surrender to bankruptcy trustees. Still, I had to help my father because I knew optics were everything. So I started acting like a public relations specialist, in damage control mode.

I also thought I had to respect the memory of my Portuguese, Roman Catholic mother, twenty-one years old when she met and married my forty-seven-year-old father. I heard rumours my mother had entered the sisterhood to become a nun, or was a nun, but she refused to clarify, except to remind me daily how devout, Catholic, and spiritual she was. Despite her modest background as the daughter of dairy farmers on the island of Sao Miguel,

Acores she was probably more of a WASP than any woman I ever met. My mother also looked after my father better than anyone, but she was dead now, mortally injured in a traffic accident while she attended a religious pilgrimage in the Acores. She seemed custom made to order for my father. She managed somehow to protect my father and his reputation, including concealing his predilection for vintage and classic erotica better than any spy engaged in counterintelligence or public relations specialist. She also somehow managed to conceal his absences and tendencies. Because my father was too preoccupied with writing his next book of theology, pondering subtle distinction in rigorous philosophical argument, totally obtuse to exhortations about practical matters, she ended up paying off drugstores and supermarkets, after he was caught walking off with, say, a pint of gourmet ice cream or throat lozenges.

As some form of recompense, she felt compelled to buy shopping carts full of overpriced groceries and shampoos, cosmetics, skin cleansers, ointments, vitamins, when she was the most frugal and thrifty shopper I ever met and refused to wear makeup. I even had to learn how to apply makeup from friends at all-girls Bishop Strachan School. A member of the same Catholic parish, my mother met my father at a church function and then a church bazaar dinner. The priest introduced his parishioners; they were both devoutly religious. They dated, if you could call attending church service and coffee at The Burger Queen afterwards dating. Then they eloped. Despite the fact he was already a considerably older man from an entirely different society when he first met my mother, who worked as a nanny for a high-ranking Brascan and Vale executives and volunteered as a Latin choir singer, they married. Some parents at the exclusive all girls private school to which my parents insisted on sending me, Bishop Strachan School, thought it was scandalous I was the daughter of a man who married a young Portuguese immigrant woman in her early twenties, with dark beautiful looks and no English education while he was in his mid-forties, no matter if he was a University of Toronto professor of theology. Although she hardly knew any English, she still had animated conversations with my father in Portuguese.

My mother, who hardly received any education beyond grade school in the Acores, was

also probably a virgin; a devout Catholic, she claimed my father was the first and only man she ever knew. Despite her village upbringing on the Acores islands of Sao Miguel and limited education, my father, who mastered Portuguese from a year he spent as a missionary in a seminary in Lisbon, thought my mother was smartest person he knew, more intelligent than anyone in his family, despite their degrees in accounting and geology, their masters of business administration and PhD's. My mother's also kept in touch with relatives who had immigrated to Canada, which was how she somehow landed in Toronto, but she would never provide me the details. For some reason she refused to discuss her past.

"You're not a war criminal, Mom. It's not as if you've anything to hide."

Still, my mother embarrassed me because she refused to learn to speak English fluently. She never wanted anything to do with the Anglos of Toronto. Her attitude made for awkward relations with the neighbours since we lived in Rosedale. After she died, my father admitted she thought they were corrupt and immoral. Still, I always got the impression my parents were deeply in love and devoted to each other.

Meanwhile, my mother did whatever she could to protect him and his reputation as a Catholic theologian. At night, while he napped at home, she secretly drove his Honda Civic from our Rosedale home and through Forest Hill on a secret mission to his campus department building at the University of Toronto. She cleaned his office, organizing his bewildering array of papers and documents and books, hiding his vintage erotica and annotated collector's edition of Marquis De Sade novels in their original French inside an officer locker and safe, sealed with a combination number padlock. She regularly logged onto his campus office computer to delete the videos and traces and tracks of the adult websites he visited. She made the same fixes on computers at home. She went to the neighbourhood bookstores, pharmacies, and supermarkets, paying off the managers and owners for the books and gourmet ice cream he sauntered off with in his bouts of absentmindedness and profound thought, as his mind laid the theological framework for his next weighty tome.

I never bothered to read his books when I was a youth; I was into drugs, drink, partying,

and gaining acceptance from my hip and privileged Rosedale friends. Then, I was into reading, but literary novels. After I took a few history courses on the Viet Nam war, the Persian Gulf Wars, and then the two World Wars, and learned the meaning of absolute, total war, I became an atheist.

I have to admit I never understood my father's theological and philosophical thinking and books. Friends and classmates who read his books, took his courses, and attended his lectures and seminars constantly reassured me he was brilliant. But he was absentminded, and his students joked about him forgetting, for instance, that the bifocal glasses he spent ten minutes doggedly and stubbornly searching for in front of a packed lecture amphitheater of three hundred students were actually on the brow of his head. Then my father was lost to his own muddled mind after he retired from teaching and my mother died in a traffic accident while she attended a religious pilgrimage that journeyed through villages on the island of Sao Miguel in the Azores.

Mom was no longer around to cook him his traditional Portuguese dishes like bacalhau, massa, sweet bread, or Portuguese sausage, chourico, Linguiça. He retreated to his old habits, the bachelor with a trust fund who took a stroll to the neighbourhood Burger Queen, a large fast food restaurant that somehow served as his reading room and study.

Despite the fact that he was in his late seventies, muddled-headed, obsessed with scholarly books and his scholarship, and still a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, meaning he only gave the odd lecture, he ate his meals at Burger Queen, black coffee, a plain grilled cheese sandwich, and a raisin bran muffin. Meanwhile, he worked on his latest book, writing in longhand on yellow legal pads. Then one evening, while the restaurant cleaner cleaned the washroom, he left a roll of tissue paper on the toilet. He planned to return and lock the roll of tissue in the spool. He correctly assumed my father had taken it and chased him down on Yonge Street. My father was in the middle of taking a long walk home, which allowed him to listen to a lecture on his smartphone through earbuds.

The cleaner held my father, with the toilet paper in his messenger bag, until the

Emergency Task Force of the Toronto Police Service arrived in a blaze of flashing lights and sirens, with a few cruisers as backup support. The command centre sent tactical police in heavy body armour and military gear with automatic weapons because the dispatcher thought an armed robbery was in progress. Reamed by an assistant manager because of the loss of cleaning supplies and the shortage of toilet paper, the cleaner was angry and vindictive. The night manager told me he was deeply embarrassed by the whole affair. After my mother died, my father was probably the fast food restaurant's most loyal customer, spending thousands of dollars a year at The Burger Queen, eating there twice daily, practically acting as a security guard. Yet he was arrested for absentmindedly walking off with a roll of toilet tissue. The assistant manager tried to call off the police, but his intervention came too late.

I drove my convertible BMW sedan to the police precinct to bail out my father. Eager and ambitious to become a deacon, the commanding officer politely chatted with him about the Catholic church, theological doctrine, and the abortion debate. Professor Heaney-O'Hara sipped the free hot coffee they offered him. The officer warned a daily newspaper reporter had come snooping around the police station. The reporter examined the police blotter and wouldn't stop asking questions. When I asked his name, the sergeant mentioned Dylan Drummond, and I could not conceal the fact I was startled, taken aback. The cop asked me if I was all right. I merely said the name sounded familiar, like an old boyfriend stalking me.

The cop guffawed awkwardly, asking, "But is everything all right?"

"I guess I'll find out," I replied.

I paid the fine or bail, or whatever the heck the five hundred dollars covered. I was so angry and disappointed I felt like I could kill somebody. I drove my father home in my BMW convertible sedan, along Toronto streets, covered with ice and snow. When I asked my father about what happened and his motives, he said my mother usually took care of such things.

"You mean you feel like you would if you had to buy condoms?"

"Embarrassment," he muttered, "it's hard to look in the eyes of a pretty young clerk when you're buying toilet paper."

“Then go to the checkout counter with the mean looking black guy and don’t look in her eyes.” He opened his book, an epically thick paperback by Hans Kung, from his messenger bag, which he fetched from between the seats, where I had put it, hoping he wouldn’t resort to his usual tactic of reading, whenever I was driving or talking to him. “If you’re too embarrassed to buy toilet paper, why didn’t you just ask me or borrow my toilet paper?”

“Because you’re a busy young woman.”

“In all fairness, Dad, I’m a boomerang kid. I’m unemployed and my business went bankrupt. I can spare time to help.”

He gazed out the car windshield, while the windshield wipers swished the freezing rain and sleet. He told me not to look at him while I was driving, but to keep my eyes on the road. The streets and thoroughfares were slippery and icy. Did I want to die in a car crash? I shook my head and gave an exasperated gasp.

“Isabella, I don’t know what to say. I feel embarrassed enough as it is. Why are you dragging this business out to no end?”

“Because you just got arrested.”

I went home and drank a half of bottle of vodka while he fell asleep in his reclining chair with a leather-bound copy of Aristotle in his lap. When I briefly awoke, unable to remember what had happened and where I was, until I spotted the painting of The Last Supper my mother had hung on the wall ages ago, I felt guilty I had returned to live at home, licking my wounds after my latest business venture failed. A Bishop Strachan School girlfriend told me not to worry because I had a trust fund. The family wealth came not from Professor Heaney-O’Hara’s brilliant academic work but a trust fund built years ago on the obscene profits of Bay Street mine holding and exploration companies, whose gold and silver mines were located in Northern Ontario. I wanted to be financially independent, but mainly I wanted to make a difference in society, in my own small way: “A healthier body and a sounder mind for women!”—was the motto of my gym and yoga studio. But my business venture tanked; I failed as an entrepreneur.

Then the big city daily newspaper reporter called. I immediately recognized the voice of

Dylan Drummond, a student at Upper Canada College. He hit on me repeatedly while I was a student at Bishop Strachan School whenever students from the all boys and all girls colleges intermingled for haphazard social functions. Actually, I have to admit now, years ago I had a crush on him and sent him a mash note. I wanted him to take my virginity. In the note I insisted on him deflowering me. After he wouldn't reciprocate or at least acknowledge that I had just made a declaration of affection, if not love, I became snarky and sarcastic with him during a party one night that originated at Burger Queen. He neatly folded my note and slipped the premium paper in the portable edition of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* I gave him and clapped it in the palm of my hand, winning forever my animosity and animus.

The next time I saw him on the sidewalk of Lonsdale Road I slapped him. He slipped on the sheet of ice glazing the sidewalk and, when he managed to stand back on his feet, he lost his footing and skidded on the glare ice of the boulevard to Lonsdale Road again. Then when he stood on his feet, laughed uneasily, and gave me that smirk I punched him in the face. I pulled back at the last millisecond, but my small hands made impact. With a bleeding nose, a bruised cheek, and a limp, he looked in so much pain I thought he had broken his leg. Instead of taking a swipe at me, he covered his brow with his hand and made a humble wounded apology. He even told me he thought the note was nice and that he had overacted, but he thought I had treated him meanly in the Burger Queen. By then there was no reconciliation and I hated him.

Now he told me he wanted to speak with my father about the arrest. Taking the offensive, I assumed the hostile and aggressive stance of a defense lawyer.

"How dare you report on the arrest of an old man with dementia?"

"None of the officers I spoke with indicated the suspect had dementia. Professor Heaney-O'Hara sounded lucid to me when I talked to him at the police division."

"You are obscene."

"I'm a crime beat reporter doing his job. And your father sounds like a bit of a white collar criminal despite the fact he may have been a priest."

"He was never a priest; he was studying for the priesthood, but something about vows

of chastity or poverty didn't agree with him. He was a leading academic theologian at the University of Toronto."

"That's exactly what makes the story so compelling and newsworthy."

"But he's aged, a senior, a confused old man."

"I've uncovered a number of complaints documented by police over the past decade," Dylan said.

I resorted to a time tested approach against which my father strongly recommended—ad hominem attacks. "You're a stalker." My father did strongly recommended asking to speak to the manager or supervisor, so I also resorted to that tactic. "I want to talk to the manager or supervisor."

"Because I'm doing my job?"

"You're harassing my father. Let me talk to your boss."

"The managing editor is in Ottawa accepting an award for investigative journalism, but I can see you tomorrow evening at the office of the newspaper."

Somehow I managed to weave into the conversation the fact I was looking for work in corporate communications or public relations. Did he know of any companies hiring or have the names and numbers of any job contacts? He said we could talk about potential work tomorrow. Giving me the address of the newspaper office building downtown, he told me to meet in the cafeteria.

The following day I put on my sexiest outfit and bought a copy of *The New York Times*. I knew he liked *The New York Times* because that was what initially attracted me to him; this teenage nerd and geek with wire-rimmed tinted glasses reading *The New York Times* while the youthful crowd was trying to party at Burger Queen. I saw him walk inside the cafeteria and watched him as he paused and glanced and picked up the *New York Times*. He folded the newspaper and placed it underneath his arm. As soon as we met, he asked me if I wanted to take a tour of the newsroom, one of the largest in North America. I didn't want to visit a newsroom that ruined routine people's lives with their muckraking and sensationalism and



ambush tactics and I could barely conceal my outrage when I said no. He told me he wanted to meet me somewhere more private. But I decided to take the offensive again, if only to defend my father somehow.

“You mean you’ve never taken anything before?”

“No,” he replied flatly.

“I saw you take that *New York Times*. You picked the paper off the table and folded it underneath your arm as if you bought it. That’s the Sunday edition and it costs over five bucks in Canada.”

He tossed *The New York Times* on the cafeteria table. I wondered why I was still providing this fool with reading material years after he delivered his stinging rebuke. “That’s called recycling.”

“I think it’s called theft.”

“Isabella, get realistic.”

Then his cell phone rang, and he said he had to go to city hall; the city hall stringer was excited about the mayor admitting to smoking crack cocaine. He asked me if he could meet me the following evening at the Burger Queen restaurant where the alleged crime took place and where, I remembered from teenage years, an in-group of Bishop Strachan girls and Upper Canada College boys would meet. I couldn’t believe the sudden change in plans, but if I had to accept his manipulation to protect my father, I decided to agree to meet the following evening.

When I returned home in my convertible BMW sedan, a car I loved, and talked to my father to try to figure out this confused businesses from start to finish, my father said my mother took care of such unmentionable things. He had run out and was too embarrassed to shop for it at drugstore.

I collapsed in the love seat and rubbed my eyes. “You mean, it’s like a teenager shopping for condoms?”

“Somebody analogous, but worse.”

“You’re a theologian, you should know better.”

“I’m only human. Advena sum et humanum.”

I replied the booking seagrant told me he expected the charges to be dropped before the case could be prosecuted in court. He shrugged and said it didn’t matter if he had a criminal record, if it was what he deserved and God intended for him. “For Christ’s sake, stop incriminating yourself. Think about your reputation and legacy.”

The following day, I met Dylan Drummond at the Burger Queen, the restaurant where the crime in question allegedly took place, I realized with a sense of irony and even déjà vu, where crowds of all-girls Bishop Strachan School and all-boys Upper Canada College students occasionally met on Friday nights years ago. Dylan Drummond somehow remembered I liked Burger Queen bacon double cheeseburgers, poutine, and cookies and cream milkshakes. After I gorged myself, underneath the table he popped a tall can of imported beer and openly sipped the overflowing suds.

“Just like old times,” he said.

His beer drinking did bring back memories, but I was not impressed. He never drank beer secretly in Burger Queen; he was the kid with his thick glasses buried inside the broadsheet pages of the *New York Times*. I wondered what had happened to his glasses and concluded he now wore contact lenses. I’m willing to speculate now the journalism profession had turned him into an alcoholic. He offered me a tall can of beer, but I refused. Then he pulled out a pint of seven-year-old Scotch whiskey and sipped straight from the bottle.

“Now it’s really like old times,” he said.

Apparently, the nerd had become a boor. “You disgust me,” I retorted.

Grinning, he said he wasn’t thinking about my father, but about whatever past relationship we may have had. He wanted to talk about us, but I thought it was absurd: he wanted to kick-start a relationship many years after he crushed my teenage crush.

“Look, I know I sent you mash notes. I mean, I started it, but it’s over.”

“What is over? It hasn’t started. I think we would make a dandy couple.”

“I did like you at one time, but that was years ago.”

“But I think I love you and I think about you all the time.”

Dylan said I looked beautiful and athletic, with perfect proportions, and asked if I was working out at the gym. My feminine intuition told me Dylan knew about the gym and yoga studio, which I owned and managed and went bankrupt, but I volunteered little information. I thought I should say more, to distract him from my father’s issues. Instead, to try to lead him astray, we chatted, made small talk, and discussed. Trying to negotiate, I said I’d gladly meet him again as long he killed the newspaper story.

“My city editor is excited about the story. He’s a stark raving mad atheist. I’ve never seen him so excited. ‘Theology prof arrested for stealing roll of commercial/industrial toilet paper.’” He smiled broadly, confidently wrapped his arm around my shoulder, and winked, and all these gestures I resented and made me seethe. “Let’s meet again. And see if we can change the editor’s mind about running the story.”

I didn’t know if I should believe him. I thought he was looking for excuses to get into my panties. We drove along the same route to our cozy borough on a main traffic artery that climbed upwards and curved, wending through fields of tall grass, abandoned and empty of traffic on either lane in the misty late night. The night felt surreal because it was so unseasonably warm and humid for early winter, but cold enough so the rain turned to ice on the road. My resentment of him grew as I drove and I felt angry and confrontational. I swerved over the traffic lane to drive close alongside and parallel with his Ford Mustang. Just as he was about to turn off the roadway, he looked at me with that smug expression and smiled his self-satisfied smirk. I hated him for his schadenfreude and smugness. I hated him for hitting on me, many years after I had a crush on him and wrote him that note that I wanted him to take my virginity. I still remembered when he returned the note to me in the copy of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which he had returned to me, slapping it in my palm, after I snapped at him, I couldn’t forget, at the same Burger Queen restaurant years ago.

Now he was a reporter exploiting the elderly. I bumped him with my convertible BMW. Instead of the warning of a fender bender I expected, his sports car lost traction on the slippery

pavement, swerved, and skidded, as he lost control of his Mustang. His car skidded off the pavement and shoulder, rolled over an embankment, and exploded in a fiery crash that almost appeared dreamy. I gazed back over my shoulder and car seat and rear view mirror and windshield at the flames. I couldn't believe it and I couldn't stop my own car, but drove home, in stunned, shocked silence. As I learned later, in the days to come, I both lost control of the narrative and gained control of the narrative.

I averted a public relations disaster, and I had a public relations disaster on my hands. The charges against my father were dropped. The local news was dominated by headlines of a Toronto big city daily newspaper reporter killed in a car accident, which may have been a hit and run incident. Traffic accidents investigators were uncertain about what precisely caused the crash, although they suspected slippery and icy road conditions as well as alcohol may have been factors, since toxicology studies and the pathologist's report showed levels of alcohol in blood samples that may have indicated he was driving under the influence. A police spokeswoman said they didn't suspect foul play, but they didn't rule out a hit-and-run accident. In fact, the evidence pointed in that direction.

No news stories about my theology professor father shoplifting, but I was totally paranoid about being arrested for a hit and run incident. I parked my convertible BMW sedan. I drove around in my father's Honda Civic, totally anonymous in a city with thousands of other Civics on the streets and expressways. I cannot justify my conduct; I can only assert that my action merely represented a desperate attempt to adapt in a universe, which I believe, unlike my father, Professor Heaney-O'Hara, is essentially immoral and ruled by natural laws.

The End

**John Tavares bio:** My previous publications include short stories published in a number of literary journals: one short fiction published in Blood & Aphorisms; one in chapbook by Plowman Press; one in Green's Magazine; one in Filling Station; two in Whetstone; two in Broken Pencil; one in Tessera; one in Windsor Review; three in Paperplates; one in The Write Place at the Write Time; three in The Maple

# Writing Raw

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Tree Literary Supplement; two in The Writing Disorder; one in Gertrude; one in Turk's Head Review; one in Outside In Literary & Travel Magazine; one in Bareback Magazine; one in Rampike; two in Crab Fat Literary Magazine; one in The Round Up Writer's Zine; one in The Acentos Review; one in Gravel; one in the Brasilia Review; one in Sediments Literary Arts-Journals; one in The Gambler. Also, I had about a dozen short stories as well as some pieces of creative nonfiction published in The Siren, then Centennial College's student newspaper. Following journalism studies, I had articles and features published in East York Observer, East York Times, Beaches Town Crier, The East Toronto Advocate, Our Toronto as well as community and trade newspapers such as York University's Excalibur and Hospital News, where I interned as an editorial assistant. I broadcast a set of my short stories as a community radio broadcaster for CBL5/CBQW in Sioux Lookout one summer. I have recently written a novel and am an avid photographer.