

1 "Ah, welcome, welcome," said the man at the whiteboard when Dempsey entered his English
2 classroom. "Jack Talis, is it?"

3 "Yeah. I go by my middle name, though. 'Dempsey.' And I'm sorry I'm late."

4 The professor nodded. "Quite all right. Linear time is such an artificial construct, don't you think?"

5 Now *that* wasn't the response Dempsey had been expecting. It certainly wouldn't have worked on his
6 ex-wife after a happy-hour overstay at Seamus's Pub.

7 "Dude!" a young guy called enthusiastically, pointing to a seat near himself.

8 With an inward sigh, he took the seat next to the kid, who was sporting a Devo t-shirt and a shit-
9 eating grin. Dempsey returned a noncommittal grimace. He felt unwilling to suggest he might
10 actually want to befriend anyone who hadn't been alive the first time he had played beer pong.

11 "I'm Jimi," Devo whispered, beaming.

12 Dempsey nodded politely again. He wasn't going to bother to remember anyone's name.

13 "Hey. Dude," Devo said, still whispering and still beaming as Dempsey took his seat. "Dempsey's a
14 cool name!"

15 Dempsey hadn't come back to college to get a new BFF. So to signal that their conversation had
16 concluded, he turned and examined the professor. Professor Doe was wearing a grey suit the color of
17 clinical depression and holding the dreaded index cards. Behind himself, on the whiteboard, he'd
18 written, "Professor Smith Doe, Ph.Ds in Anthropology and Comparative Religion."

19 *Smith Doe?* And were these the credentials of an English teacher?

20 Dempsey checked the syllabus on his desk and squinted to make out the name of the text:

21 *Commas, Splices, and Wormholes.*

22 "Huh?" he muttered aloud. Wormholes? He wasn't expecting *that*, either.

23 "Now, our work here will demand some strong bonds of trust. So let's begin by getting to know one
24 another," the professor suggested. "Unless anyone has questions?"

25 "Yeah. So do we gotta come *every* Saturday?" someone asked from the corner.

26 "Erm, yes, well it's expected that a regular—" Professor Doe began.

27 "Is this class gonna be hard?" another student interrupted. "I'm on academic probation."

28 "Hard? Well, all difficulty is relative. Actually, *everything* is relative." The professor chuckled. "Except
29 relativity, of course."

30 Dempsey felt his eyebrows rise. He leafed through the syllabus rapidly, looking for some mention of
31 English, but the endless packet still seemed unintelligible.

32 "Excuse me, Professor Doe," an older woman said, shaking her cane for emphasis. "But this must be a
33 mistake. Says here we've got a test on astral projection the Saturday after Thanksgiving."

34 Dempsey sat up. "Wait. Astral projection? What kind of class is — is this English Comp?"

35 God, how he wished he could have tested out of this class. He thought longingly ahead to the first
36 bubbly birthday pint his friends would set in front of him later that night. They'd get a kick out of
37 this. Tell him to build a rocket ship to the Nebula Galaxy. Tell him to start packing for Retrogiving in
38 Crazytown.

39 "Pssst. Dude. You with us? Prof wants us to fill out these cards, but you zoned out or something. Just
40 put your name, phone number, and an interesting fact about yourself to share."

41 Dempsey rolled his eyes, then picked up his index card obediently, mostly because the concerned
42 expression on Devo-Dude's face suggested that he wasn't sure Dempsey was up to the task.

43 Around them, the students' questions buzzed, joining the swarm in Dempsey's head.

44 "I got a nervous condition," someone said. "Can't we Zoom these classes instead?"

45 "Dude, you could just take gummies before class! They're totally legal now, right, Prof?"

46 "Is it okay if I bring my kids with me?"

47 "Hey, wait — if she brings her kids, can I bring my cat?"

48 "Yo, sometimes I'm gonna come late, when my boss gets stoned in the stockroom and makes me
49 close up. That okay?"

50 "What if I got one of those orange service-cat uniforms?"

51 "Is this class full? I couldn't register on time 'cause I was in jail."

52 Dempsey groaned inwardly at that last statement, crossed his phone number off the index card, and
53 filled in a fake one. For his interesting fact about himself, he now wrote: *I know Jujitsu*. Then he
54 rubbed his eyes, wondering if he'd already fallen asleep again. Professor Doe looked weary also, and
55 less confident than when he had proclaimed the relativity of all existence.

56 "Ahem. Perhaps Dean Ursus can help answer these questions when he arrives," the professor finally
57 said, adjusting his glasses.

58 A teenager looked up from her phone. "The dean? You getting observed or something, Bambi?"

59 *Man*. Dempsey had never seen a college class eat a teacher alive like this. He began to feel sorry for
60 Smith Doe, who, true to his name, looked like a deer pinned in the headlights of an oncoming semi. So
61 Dempsey raised his hand — a formality which had eluded the other students — and waited.

62 ***

63 What strategies were used to introduce these characters? What did you notice about names, order,
64 characterizing details, etc.?

65 What dynamics are at play? Do you notice any groupings or ways readers might attach to these
66 characters?

67 Did it stress you out as a reader to meet so many characters? If so, at what point? If not, why not?

68 Were there any characters, names, or details that you think could be cut or triaged for now?

69 Which characters do you feel you know the best here, and why?