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The Marvelous Technique: A Campus Novel

- Fragment -

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Author's Note

This is not a *roman à clef*. Neither the University of Saint Jeremiah, nor the professors, students and situations that appear in the novel exist. In short, any similarity with real events or people is pure coincidence (despite the fact that fiction and reality sometimes become confused to an abracadabra-esque degree).

There are, after all, millions of people waiting for a sign.
Many of them are university graduates.
Saul Bellow

IT IS A TRUTH UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the campus of the University of Saint Jeremiah is located in the far north east of the Fresh Falls valley and is surrounded by the violent and necessary Rococo Mountains and divided by the Ancient River. All of this can be seen in the below image and, accordingly, we don't need to say any more about it.



The economic impact that the University of Saint Jeremiah has on the region is enormous: more than 17,000 jobs created, 800 million euros received every year, turning the area into a tourist attraction that in socioeconomic terms is valued at some 12,000 jobs and 678 million euros per year. However, we won't say any more about the market angle either because frankly, it's boring.

What we will mention is that this campus, entirely devoid of features of architectural interest, was designed as part of a government project to educate the elite on a global scale. In short, the University of Saint Jeremiah holds the highest concentration of privileged minds per square meter in the country, the *crème de la crème* of the promising young intelligentsia that perhaps, some day in the future, will come to occupy the most powerful positions within society. That is to say, if ever there were a paradise of academe, this patrician and agrarian university town is surely the nearest thing to it, the empirical proof that better quality education really does exist. But studying there costs a fortune, of course.

“Look out! Something's coming at top speed!”

“Who or what is it? Is it a mosquito? A plane? A superhero? A new marketing product?”

“No, it's someone in a wheelchair!”

“In that case it can only be the librarian Jeanne Darc, *ad-interim* overseer of all the librarians!”

“She's getting nearer by the minute!”

“They say that she suffers from a strange paralysis from the waist down.”

“She herself says she suffers from Raynaud's Disease. The doctors say otherwise!”

“Watch out! One day she'll run someone over! Fudge!... *omnia mors aequat!*”

On that same morning of the year of Our Lord 2012, the librarian Jeanne Darc moved through the campus in her electric wheelchair with a certain elegance, breathing in the scent of flowering jasmine that perfumed the

gardens of Saint Jeremiah. She passed through Anthony Trollope Square and by the tavern The Happy Pony. She zipped in front of the kiosk and left the giant skeleton of the famous *Mammuthus americanus* in front of the Museum of the Flora and Fauna of Saint Jeremiah in the dust. She passed the gym and its regulation Olympic-sized pool. She passed the Academy Hotel, where conference attendees from around the world were hosted, passed the Pompeu Fabra butcher shop (proudly bearing a sign that said: “Note: we exclusively sell Km0 meat”), and followed the path that sloped downwards, observing the bowling pitch where students played on Friday afternoons, the boutiques selling brand-name sweaters, shirts and dresses, the Serengeti supermarket with jars of lentils and toilet paper on special in the front window, and the student and faculty residences. This false town featured all of this and so much more: depressing bars, shops, bookstores, veterinary clinics, cinemas, tennis pitches, offices, drugstores, psychologists, everything.

Happening upon the professor of Postcolonial Catalan Studies, Professor Walter Ballsini who was walking his poodle with the terrorized eyes, she greeted him with the cordiality that only the inhabitants of a university campus can muster. A little further on, under a carob tree, Librarian Darc, a true specialist in harvesting rumours, overheard the heated discussion between Professor Colz and Professor Satz on the subject of literary language.

“We must (quotation marks) ‘twist the language’ (close quotes), as I have said. I prefer a protean Catalan, a furious Catalan, a mongrel Catalan, full of spelling mistakes, in the style of Pushkin...!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Satz. I assure you that creating a discordant tongue somewhere between vulgarity and artifice does not result in better writing.”

“Don’t even begin with your standardizations and nationalist pomp, what you say is insufferable *charlatanism*. If you continue in this way, I shall never speak to you again.”

“Let’s change the subject, then. How are your haemorrhoids these days?”

Et caetera, et caetera.

It was highly sophisticated conversations such as these that provided much of the originality and richness of this earthly Eden, with its three-dimensional geraniums that had no need of hydroponic systems. Such exchanges put to the proof the theory that a bucolic environment, far from the malignant vices of the city, was a guarantee of scholarly excellence in the form of course credits accrued. Let us add that the climate, enlivened by the gusty northern winds, would have purified the mind more than any vitamin supplement had it not been for the steel factory in the village of Saint Pancras of Paradise (the next town over), which had polluted the river and surrounding countryside to an alarming degree.

Meanwhile, Jeanne Darc continued on her wheelchair-bound way, gliding past The Crypt, one of the campus dining halls, where they served the celebrated Proust's Muffin (a monstrous concoction made with goat entrails and Brazil nuts, consumed with cannibalistic fervour by succeeding generations of students), towards the Nathaniel Hawthorne Gardens, one of the campus's parks. She stopped beneath the jagged shade of a cypress, and turned on her small battery-powered radio to listen to her favourite librarian program: *Dominate, Collect and Determine* (or was it *Compare, Classify and Categorize?*). The summery weather meant that the gardens were full of authentically bright young Kiwis,¹ surly and yet simultaneously adorable, with their minds full of charming young fantasies.

As the librarian contemplated the beautiful sight of the Rococo Mountains in the distance, and the blurred flight line of a bird that traced an upwards curve in the sky, she noticed a pair of Kiwis on the tender grass, French-kissing and lying entwined in a pose that seemed to have been copied from a Sacher-Masoch novel.

"Please be gentle, Orlando, gentle."

"You are worse than a nun, Misericordia. I can't even touch a nipple without you jumping," replied Orlando, furious.

"You're always the same," she said. "Turned on like a stove."

"— ¿No será culpa de tus polycyclic ovaries, cutie?"

"Don't be a pain. It's always the same. If I have a moustache, if we don't fuck enough, if blah, blah, whatever.... It's always because of my

ovaries. Moreover, it's "polycystic," not "polycyclic," idiot, and mine aren't. If I don't like you squeezing my tits it's because it's almost the Saint Jeremiah Festival and I'm nervous because I don't know what to wear...!"

"You're always looking for excuses. Good luck finding someone else to put up with them!"

And so on and so on.

Jeanne Darc, who, to be fair, had something of the nun about her as a result of her strict Franciscan education, found this fragment of adolescent groping terribly vulgar. And then she thought about the Festival of Saint Jeremiah. How could she have forgotten about the Festival? The librarian, trembling with excitement, nervously set the wheels of her chair in motion and lost herself among the mob of students that furiously invaded the campus. For that week in October was a special week for one simple reason; namely, that it commemorated the founding of the campus, which dated from 1946, and was celebrated with the Festival of Saint Jeremiah. In the midst of term-time madness, houses and streets were decorated with coloured flags, faces were disfigured by icy smiles, the atmosphere roared with a disturbing power and everything seemed illuminated. The famed Festival included, among other activities, sack races, sandbox bowling, gorgonzola fondues, amateur theatre productions, barbecues with complicated consumption rituals, erotic cabaret shows, gastric explosions, simple math problems, the smell of armpits, to-the-death Ping-Pong championships, folk music concerts, amazing shrink-wrapped sausage paté, and a great deal of home-brewed liquor, hundreds of litres of it, which the students, sheathed in their cardigans and blazers with the university coat of arms sewn onto the chest, absorbed assiduously. In short: a week of uproar and revelry.

The whole campus burst with friendliness and harmony that October morning but, warning! At some point something had happened to perturb that ultra-civilized peace. The night before a group of students had graffitied the wall of one tower of the dean's residence, the Ronald Knox Residence. It read:

What do you think of the egg-faced dean?

Do you think he's as ugly as Hitler? As Mao Tse Tung? As a pig?
What do you think about the global crisis
Or the Apocalipsis?
What do you think about thinking?
Don't think so much!
Just drink more!

This kind of hooliganism was sternly punished at Saint Jeremiah, and the university regulations had a long list of disciplinary measures for cases such as this and other flagrant floutings of the rules. The students who had made the graffiti were recognized by a pair of night-time security guards, who confirmed that they came from the Fraternity of Insane Intellectuals – the worst of all the fraternities. They were hauled into the Dean's office, the central point of the campus.

A student showed up in front of the Dean's secretary. He wore a rather too-large blazer, a white shirt with the typical blue and yellow tie that identifies the students of Saint Jeremiah, and ridiculous short trousers. Housed within his mountain of clothing was a boy whose face was covered with horrible, pus-filled pimples but who nonetheless had an irrepressible *joie de vivre*.

"Protheed," said the secretary, with a strong lisp.

"I've come to see the Dean. Can you tell him I'm here, ma'am?"

"You can't, not without an appointment."

"I have an appointment."

"Name? Student number? You must have your student number."

"Juan Ramón Calostrum. J.R. to my friends. Student number 000000001."

The secretary snickered like a Valkyrie. She couldn't stop laughing.

"You? You are the zthe one? Go zthrough, it'sth zthat way," she gasped, laughing all the while and pointing a sausage-like finger to indicate the dean's office.

Antonia the secretary didn't laugh just for the sake of it; she had a reason. Juan Ramón Calostrum was the only person alive to have been born at Saint Jeremiah. The advantage? He didn't have to pay tuition. The main disadvantage? He was an orphan. He had never known his parents,

who were likely two students with raging hormones who conceived him, graduated, and abandoned him. The young J.R. was found, wrapped in a white sheet, a divine gift, in one of the parks on campus. And there he had grown up, entirely lacking in necessary motherly love, wandering the campus gardens like a wild animal, surrounded by inexpressive professors who spent their days with their noses stuck permanently in books. Despite growing up in an environment dominated by rheumy-eyed intellectuals, our young Kaspar Hauser did not say his first word until he was six years old. And it was neither “dad-dy” nor “ma-ma.” No indeed. It was “colostrum.” “COLOSTRUM, COLOSTRUM...” said the child, seeking the elixir of any starving newborn. And so he was named for the milk of the breast he had never suckled. In fact, from a young age, all he had tasted was the industrial coffee from the machines to be found in all the faculties. Once his brain had developed to a reasonable degree, J.R. had studied all of the science degrees to be found in the university, and afterwards all of the arts degrees. He had lasted a single semester in each before failing, due to a revolutionary procedure invented in the Middle Ages: the exam.

Almost three months ago, however, he had been studying Literature for the second time. It was there that our young hero of academe seemed, at last, to have stumbled upon happiness in the form of the Anglo-Saxon literary genre known as the campus, or university, novel. J.R. immediately identified with these novels, stories written by people who lived or had lived on university campuses, like him, and who wrote about life on those same campuses. The poor orphan fantasized over the literary descriptions of those academic microcosms, with their inter-departmental battles, the petty jealousies and Machiavellian machinations of the professors, the existential tribulations of the young students and, in general, over the plots and themes that seemed to repeat themselves in every Campus Novel. Fascinated by this meta-academic literature, he decided to dedicate his best years to the study and scholarship of Academic Fiction. *One day, for better or worse, I will astonish everyone with this work*, J.R. thought to himself. “He’s a bit thick,” one professor said.

In any case, J.R. knew how to walk. And at this moment he was walking across a carpet that led to the Dean’s office, a carpet so ugly that

any description we try to provide will only be insulting. The boy opened the enormous wooden door and found himself in the company of the Fraternity of Insane Intellectuals, seated in a cluster around the Dean. J.R. had been associated with this fraternity due to an error. Or, rather, in the past he had indeed belonged to the Fraternity of Insane Intellectuals, but he was no longer a member. But the damage had already been done. He sat in the only available chair, joining this obligatory meeting. He looked at Dean Barbecue. The man was morbidly obese, snored rather than breathed, and had a short round nose attached to a Nietzschemoustache. All this had earned him the nickname "Piggy," because his face resembled, to an astonishing degree, that of a hooved mammal wallowing in shit.

"Let's see... We'll begin by finding out which of you are from the Fraternity of the Insane What's-Its. Are you from the Fraternity?" the Dean asked a newcomer in a mechanical tone.

"I don't know -- hic!" lied a lanky Kiwi in the midst of an attack of hiccups.

"And you...?" the Dean asked another boy. "Reply yes or no."

"Yes or no," that boy replied, with phenomenal idontcarenessism. The Dean, slightly confused, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a tissue.

"Are you having me on?" He asked, in a friendly tone.

"No sir," said a third boy in a typical Bronx Valley accent. "You awhr flippin' OUT."

The Dean was growing desperate, and sweating more and more. Sweat dripped down his face, and from the neck down he was nothing more than one enormous drop of sweat.

"Och, an wat's trew is that I dinnae be of the fraternity."

"I don'tunderstand a single wordyousaid, boy. How about speaking standard Catalan like everyone else?"

"Mr. Barbecue, how can you be so insensitive to dialectical variants?" cried another student. "Fascist!"

"Yes! Fascist! Bourgeois!" exclaimed the rest.

“But, but....” The Dean was overwhelmed by such insolence. The office hummed with unresolved tension. Barbecue blushed still further, and a vein in the middle of his forehead began to pulse.

“Out! Everyone out! You gang of microcerebruses!!!

The boys stood up and filed quickly towards the door. J.R. already had one foot halfway outside when the Dean caught him by the arm.

“Not you. You stay here.”

“Sir, that’s not fair,” complained J.R., who was unprepared for a *tête-a-tête* with the Dean. “I am not a member of the Fraternity of Insane Intellectuals. It’s all a big mistake.”

“Don’t worry, their time will come,” said the dean, searching for his student record. “Divide and conquer. I cannot allow myself to become a laughing stock. Some respect, for golly’s sake.”

J.R. took a seat once more, prepared to receive a true Saint Jeremiah lecture from the dean. A consuming silence, full of small sounds, settled over the office for a few visibly uncomfortable moments. J.R. was transfixed by the dean’s office, which had a strange smell of rot. On the four walls were hung the heads of a buffalo, an antelope, a zebra, a seal and even a shrunken human head from an Amazon tribe as decoration. Dean Barbecue was famous for his liking for hunting game big and small. The office, in addition to the hunting trophies, featured Ancient Greek-style vases, flagons of French wine, a collection of economics journals, a photograph of himself reeling in a mutant on the Ancient River, and a number of other items that J.R. was already tired of looking at.

“What’s wrong with you, young gentleman? You’re very white, and all-eyes.... do you feel unwell?” the dean asked. “Ah, perhaps you feel the sword of Damocles hanging over your head? I see this is not the first time that you engage in such hooliganism. Your student record lists a number of little outings that are difficult to forgive. He read aloud:

On April 28th, two years ago, a failed attempt to begin the Sour Butter Rebellion, modelled on that of Harvard University in 1766,

protesting the poor state of campus residences.

On November 2nd of last year, apprehended by a security guard for stealing a first Spanglish edition of Don Quixote de la Mancha from the library.

On May 23rd, caught red-handed selling homework to the laziest students, which, moreover, were nothing more than rehashed versions of published articles, (Academic plagiarism is unforgivable)!

“In short, we could continue reciting this list all the livelong day.

“Sir, I declare myself innocent of all the crimes that I am charged with, apart from the plagiarism,” said J.R. “True, imitation and verisimilitude became confused because I read a great deal; it seemed to me I learned too much, but in reality I understood nothing. One thing is true. Everything was done in the spirit of *animus jocandi*.”

The cries of a group of students protesting in the square below wafted into the Dean’s Office. Barbecue repeatedly made the sign of the cross and murmured Our Fathers under his breath.

“Fine, well, you realize the mess I have, having to put up with the likes of you, don’t you? A group of rebel students who have occupied the Auditorium of the Faculty of Arts for the last three weeks and spend their days smoking dope and sticking their tongues down others’ throats. Then, this morning some clowns came to film a series about a fictitious university campus. *Stories of Love and University* is the name of it. Doesn’t that strike you as ridiculous. I think it’s completely ridiculous. But basically, if they want to throw money at us, we never say no. Television always pays well. And then we have the issue of the Festival. Last year the whole thing finished with a campus-wide battle between the Kiwis and the master’s students over that barman from the Prancing Pony... what was his name? Jim, Slim, Grim, Pipo, Flipo Baptista or something like that, and his damned hallucinatory homebrew liquor. All kinds of things went down: shouting, prayers, noses, blood... it was total

chaos! This year, by law, only sparkling water will be served, and that champagne they make for children that I can't remember the name of."

"Pinky..." supplied J.R. in a neutral tone.

"We live in times of mental feebleness, boy. People just want to have a good time and think as little as possible... no one has any manners any more! You think I don't know that they call me 'Piggy?' Of course I know! What fault is it of mine that I was born with this face? Listen, at the university there are two sides to the story: the students' side and the professors' side, and both sides call me Piggy. No one has any respect for me. Terrible, don't you think? If I learn the names of everyone who conspires against me and insults me, I will crush them immediately. Then they will laugh... they'll burst their esophagi from so much laughing! Or am I supposed to put up with these stupidities, in addition to the professors scrambling to steal my job? 'Oh friends, there is no friend,' as the philosopher said. And how right he was! But none of this is of any interest to you."

"No? Why not?" J.R. asked.

"Because you will not be getting your degree at this campus, young man. One more strike against you and you will be officially expelled from Saint Jeremiah," said Dean Barbecue. "Now help yourself to those containers of lye over there and go and scrub the graffiti off... Run now!"

J.R. left the Dean's office with his head down, spent. As he passed the secretary, he had the impression that she whispered his name under her breath and laughed. Once he was out of the building, he contemplated the crowd of students moving *en masse* towards the gardens, jumping on the carpets of autumn leaves, chatting about highly academic matters, the more coquettish girls applying make-up, the nerdiest students opening and closing their binders for the new school year. Some planned warlike fraternity initiation rites, others argued about books. In the distance, a chorus of students shrieked and howled the words of a song, warning of some new *horroris causa*, probably an intellectual with his eyes bleary and caked with sleep, going about his business dressed in a toga and a ridiculous hat:

GaudeamusIgitur,

Iuvenesdumsumus (bis)
Post iucundamiuentem
Post molestamsenectutem,
Noshabebit...

Some Kiwis who had infiltrated the chapel choir purposefully changed the words of the university theme song, to the annoyance of the choir director, who spent his days instructing them in the strict discipline of musical theory and institutional authority, to no noticeable effect. Such irreverence, meanwhile, was exceptionally popular with the student body, and ceremonies transformed into spontaneous parties, with everyone laughing up a storm.

While J.R. scrubbed the defaced Dean's residence with bleach, he noticed a group of people who appeared to be signalling something to him with their fingers. Or perhaps it was just his imagination? No, they were signalling him. It was the television crew who had come to film exterior shots for the series *Stories of Love and University*. Three fixed cameras were filming super close-ups of the campus Popular Orchestra, who were now having their morning rehearsal, everyone singing the *Radetzky March* by Johann Strauss with such tuneless military gusto that it could have revived the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire in one fell swoop.

J.R. had wandered into the middle of a scene in which two actors dressed as Socrates and Aristophanes argued over the *Paideia* and the education of philosophers.

"Whoa, what a monster of a fake beard you got," muttered Socrates, lighting a cigarette after the director had called "cut!"

"No, no," said Aristophanes. "It's my real beard. I wash it every day with jasmine-scented shampoo."

"May I ask what you're doing here in the middle of my scene, moron?" fumed the director upon catching sight of J.R. "You've messed up the whole scene!"

The student moved away so the television crew could film their scene and saw that a monstrous eye-booger had conquered the summit of one of his eyes. It was a terrible eye-booger, elephantine, psychopathic. More than one professor had gone mad from such monstrous boogers. But this particular specimen that climbed J.R.'s eye did not resemble the

typical sort of eye-booger suffered by student and professor alike. It was something much more powerful. An eye-booger of such power and intellect was a dangerous thing: it could leave you blind, sandy-eyed, stupid for all of time. From the time of his earliest memories, J.R. had suffered such accumulations in his eyes, sticky stains of intellectual blackness, eye-boogers that could be seen from a cargo ship in the Red Sea, from the peaks of the Rococo Mountains, the horizon of the Atlantic glaciers, from the elegant skyscrapers in the Bronx Valley, from every point on the diameter of the globe. Or such was J.R.'s theory.

Translated by Emily McBride

Note:

¹ i.e., name given to first year students at Saint Jeremiah.