



Chapter Three: Meet Dr. Tang Yawney

Miles stepped into the back of a medium-sized amphitheater on the university campus. The lecture hall contained rows of second-semester freshmen fulfilling a general education breadth requirement, “Archaeology 102: Methods and Foundations”. Miles saw the usual mix of student interest: one-third aptly paying attention to every word of the lecture, one-third staring at their phones with an ear open for outrageous comments, and one-third slouching dazed, hung-over or sleeping, ignoring every word.

Amiably pacing the dais, Dr. Tang Yawney, the polarizing idiosyncratic professor of archaeology, dissected an ironic puzzle with the energy of a TED talk presenter.

"In your textbook, Highburn and Lotus claim that the physical traits of Homo sapiens include a high and rounded 'globular'



braincase and a relatively narrow pelvis... Compared to what, I wonder? A high and globular braincase compared to whom?"

Dr. Yawney confidently presented the textbook's thesis in one sentence, and then in the next, he unraveled the assumptions that underlay it. Miles couldn't help but smile.

"It depends on the specific specimen, the braincase in question, and even the species... These generalizations hide complexities, unknowns, and, most importantly, the good questions."

The one-third of the class that held Dr. Yawney in high esteem murmured approvingly. They recognized that he championed their individuality.

"I want you to understand how to ask good questions and explore all angles," Dr. Yawney explained, "to learn about thinking itself, to think for yourself."

Miles felt this subset of students' admiration for Dr. Yawney bloom and grow. He said the things they felt and wanted to be stated aloud as good principles. As Dr. Yawney spoke, Miles felt these students resonate with a deeper belief in the goodness of humanity. When Dr. Yawney encouraged them to think for themselves, they felt the warmth of official acceptance in a hostile world. Dr. Yawney championed, encouraged, and emboldened them to seek and develop their own worldview.

But another one-third of the class was far more rigid and deeply skeptical. Think for yourself? They already thought for themselves. They did not need the old lefty to tell them that they should challenge their own way of thinking. Just give them the facts that they would be tested on. This was a required course. It would be graded and included in their GPA. They wanted to know what they had to know to get a high grade. These lectures, setting up the students and then leaving them free-falling with unresolved issues and inscrutable conclusions, were just pretentious and wasteful ego trips.

The other one-third didn't pretend to care. They would think for themselves about what they wanted to think about anyway. School was an egocentric game of mimicry, but so was everything else. Besides, the real truth was: the frat had the final exam from last year. They would pass. And they were never going to think about Anthropology ever again. It really did not matter.

"This skull means nothing, and nobody cares," Dr. Yawney directly addressed the freshmen, trying to capture their attention. "But the facts, history, and theories imposed on the skull are a different story. Our language, education, religion, customs, habits, mathematics, alphabet, and logic are products of societal agreements, indoctrination, and culture. They are manufactured. Understanding how these stories prevail and how cultural norms are established is fascinating."

"These constructs make us feel safe, powerful, and secure," Dr. Yawney elaborated. "However, accepting social and cultural norms without critical thought means accepting that



these issues are already solved, figured out, and, in a sense, dead. "

"A cynic would argue that society establishes what we don't have to think about to direct our attention and work toward other things that benefit society's agenda. And these cynics often make good money," Dr. Yawney joked.

Miles laughed, joining the mirth of the one-third of the class who adored him.

"The university should be here to teach you to recognize and unpack these constructs on multiple levels so that you can begin establishing your own personal identity based on scrutiny, perspective, perception, and skills. Your professors should foster independent thinking and your own authentic personal experience."

A tense student raised his hand. Dr. Yawney reluctantly allowed the question. "Will this be on the final exam?"

Suddenly, at the mention of the words "final exam", the last one-third of the class, who were not totally asleep, perked up.

"Oh, yes, the final," Dr. Yawney's smile faded slightly. He involuntarily frowned. "The test be multiple choice ...on the text...."

As the school bell rang, students rustled, stood up, and prepared to leave.

Dr. Yawney gathered his notes. A smattering of students approached the dais and offered small gestures of approval, while other students skulked out, some not so subtly shaking their heads in disapproval. Miles lingered as the post-lecture scrum dispersed.

“Dr. Yawney, I was wondering if I could talk to you for a moment about the dig?” Miles asked respectfully.

Well aware that he was polarizing and not entirely appreciated or liked, Dr. Yawney looked brightly at Miles. "The dig? I have been thinking about that myself. I just have a few minutes between my freshman lectures. Do you like coffee? I find that it does wonders," Dr. Yawney gestured, and Miles followed him into a bustling hallway filled with college students rushing between classes.

"Are you new to the class?"

"In some ways, maybe," Miles mused.

"Not a freshman," Dr. Yawney noted.

"I'm a senior," Miles said, "A super senior in fact."

"Excellent," Dr. Yawney exclaimed. "An open mind is a rare gem. The university wants courses, facts, answers, tests, grades, and certainty—a pretense of safety and security. They discourage all this thinking, urging students to focus, work, buy things, and conform."

Dr. Yawney studied Miles, gauging how much he could reveal. "It's no secret that the tuitions are outrageous and that work these days is tacit wage slavery, most jobs consume people's lives for mere sustenance, the work primarily benefiting the very wealthy—the ones with their names on the university buildings here."

"It's a feudal society. There are a few billionaires, and then the rest of us are serfs—generationally controlled, manipulated, and making a meager living with no opportunity, even through education, to pursue any other agenda. What happened?" Dr. Yawney lamented. "But what's it all for, really? You can train valuable employees who follow directions and work hard without burdening them with four years of debt."

"I never thought of it that way," Miles admitted.

"I don't always hold this opinion, but more and more often I do. Any-who, how can I assist you? What questions can I pester you with?" Dr. Yawney asked.

"I was interested in the dig," Miles revealed.

"That's right, the dig," Dr. Yawney smiled ruefully, " Unfortunately, the funding—well, I am—hmph." Miles observed Dr. Yawney, witnessing his mind swirling, reorganizing, and exploring ideas. It was as if he were juggling a myriad of colorful balls, defying physical laws and creating intricate, beautiful patterns in his mental space. "I would like to say..." Dr. Yawney began, his words noncommittal, "It's still up in the air, quite uncertain, I'm afraid." He smiled.

"That's ok," Miles said blandly.

"What if I told you that everything I lectured about today was rubbish?"

"Everything?" Miles replied, intrigued.

"Yes, everything."

"I wouldn't believe you," Miles stated.

Dr. Yawney laughed heartily. "Exactly, I wouldn't believe me either. But as for the dig, are you genuinely interested? It may take a year, with no pay, in a remote location, with subpar or no food, exposed to the elements, and with no real chance of finding anything... Afterward, it's

generally considered a wretched and dirty experience, something to complain about endlessly—a test of one's endurance for misery and frustration. And let's not forget having to listen to me ramble all day."

"Is that an offer?" Miles asked.

"How about this? Friday night, 7 PM, Alumni Hall. I'll be presenting the dig's schematics to the Alumni Explorers' Club. It's a peculiar group of eccentrics, oddballs, and quirky characters..."

Miles chuckled.

"Come hear the presentation," Dr. Yawney continued. "It might be my last chance to secure decent funding."

"I'll be there," Miles extended his hand, and Dr. Yawney warmly shook it.

"Um, sorry, what's your name?" Dr. Yawney asked.

"Miles, Miles Chaplin..."

Dr. Yawney smiled, "Great to meet you, Miles Chaplin."