

The Human Stain

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Everyone Knows

IT WAS in the summer of 1998 that my neighbor Coleman Silk—who, before retiring two years earlier, had been a classics professor at nearby Athena College for some twenty-odd years as well as serving for sixteen more as the dean of faculty—confided to me that, at the age of seventy-one, he was having an affair with a thirty-four-year-old cleaning woman who worked down at the college. Twice a week she also cleaned the rural post office, a small gray clapboard shack that looked as if it might have sheltered an Okie family from the winds of the Dust Bowl back in the 1930s and that, sitting alone and forlorn across from the gas station and the general store, flies its American flag at the junction of the two roads that mark the commercial center of this mountainside town.

Coleman had first seen the woman mopping the post office floor when he went around late one day, a few minutes before closing time, to get his mail—a thin, tall, angular woman with graying blond hair yanked back into a ponytail and the kind of severely sculpted features customarily associated with the church-ruled, hardworking goodwives who suffered through New England's harsh beginnings, stern colonial women locked up within the reigning morality and obedient to it. Her name was Faunia Farley, and whatever miseries she endured she kept concealed behind one of those inexpressive bone faces that hide nothing and bespeak an

immense loneliness. Faunia lived in a room at a local dairy farm where she helped with the milking in order to pay her rent. She'd had two years of high school education.

The summer that Coleman took me into his confidence about Faunia Farley and their secret was the summer, fittingly enough, that Bill Clinton's secret emerged in every last mortifying detail—every last *lifelike* detail, the livingness, like the mortification, exuded by the pungency of the specific data. We hadn't had a season like it since somebody stumbled upon the new Miss America nude in an old issue of *Penthouse*, pictures of her elegantly posed on her knees and on her back that forced the shamed young woman to relinquish her crown and go on to become a huge pop star. Ninety-eight in New England was a summer of exquisite warmth and sunshine, in baseball a summer of mythical battle between a home-run god who was white and a home-run god who was brown, and in America the summer of an enormous piety binge, a purity binge, when terrorism—which had replaced communism as the prevailing threat to the country's security—was succeeded by cocksucking, and a virile, youthful middle-aged president and a brash, smitten twenty-one-year-old employee carrying on in the Oval Office like two teenage kids in a parking lot revived America's oldest communal passion, historically perhaps its most treacherous and subversive pleasure: the ecstasy of sanctimony. In the Congress, in the press, and on the networks, the righteous grandstanding creeps, crazy to blame, deplore, and punish, were everywhere out moralizing to beat the band: all of them in a calculated frenzy with what Hawthorne (who, in the 1860s, lived not many miles from my door) identified in the incipient country of long ago as "the persecuting spirit"; all of them eager to enact the astringent rituals of purification that would excise the erection from the executive branch, thereby making things cozy and safe enough for Senator Lieberman's ten-year-old daughter to watch TV with her embarrassed daddy again. No, if you haven't lived through 1998, you don't know what sanctimony is. The syndicated conservative newspaper columnist William F. Buckley wrote, "When Abelard did it, it was

possible to prevent its happening again," insinuating that the president's malfeasance—what Buckley elsewhere called Clinton's "incontinent carnality"—might best be remedied with nothing so bloodless as impeachment but, rather, by the twelfth-century punishment meted out to Canon Abelard by the knife-wielding associates of Abelard's ecclesiastical colleague, Canon Fulbert, for Abelard's secret seduction of and marriage to Fulbert's niece, the virgin Heloise. Unlike Khomeini's fatwa condemning to death Salman Rushdie, Buckley's wistful longing for the corrective retribution of castration carried with it no financial incentive for any prospective perpetrator. It was prompted by a spirit no less exacting than the ayatollah's, however, and in behalf of no less exalted ideals. It was the summer in America when the nausea returned, when the joking didn't stop, when the speculation and the theorizing and the hyperbole didn't stop, when the moral obligation to explain to one's children about adult life was abrogated in favor of maintaining in them every illusion about adult life, when the smallness of people was simply crushing, when some kind of demon had been unleashed in the nation and, on both sides, people wondered "Why are we so crazy?," when men and women alike, upon awakening in the morning, discovered that during the night, in a state of sleep that transported them beyond envy or loathing, they had dreamed of the brazenness of Bill Clinton. I myself dreamed of a mammoth banner, draped dadaistically like a Christo wrapping from one end of the White House to the other and bearing the legend A HUMAN BEING LIVES HERE. It was the summer when—for the billionth time—the jumble, the mayhem, the mess proved itself more subtle than this one's ideology and that one's morality. It was the summer when a president's penis was on everyone's mind, and life, in all its shameless impurity, once again confounded America.

Sometimes on a Saturday, Coleman Silk would give me a ring and invite me to drive over from my side of the mountain after dinner to listen to music, or to play, for a penny a point, a little gin rummy, or to sit in his living room for a couple of hours and sip some co-

gnac and help him get through what was always for him the worst night of the week. By the summer of 1998, he had been alone up here—alone in the large old white clapboard house where he'd raised four children with his wife, Iris—for close to two years, ever since Iris suffered a stroke and died overnight while he was in the midst of battling with the college over a charge of racism brought against him by two students in one of his classes.

Coleman had by then been at Athena almost all his academic life, an outgoing, sharp-witted, forcefully smooth big-city charmer, something of a warrior, something of an operator, hardly the prototypical pedantic professor of Latin and Greek (as witness the Conversational Greek and Latin Club that he started, heretically, as a young instructor). His venerable survey course in ancient Greek literature in translation—known as GHM, for Gods, Heroes, and Myth—was popular with students precisely because of everything direct, frank, and unacademically forceful in his comportment. "You know how European literature begins?" he'd ask, after having taken the roll at the first class meeting. "With a quarrel. All of European literature springs from a fight." And then he picked up his copy of *The Iliad* and read to the class the opening lines. "'Divine Muse, sing of the ruinous wrath of Achilles . . . Begin where they first quarreled, Agamemnon the King of men, and great Achilles.' And what are they quarreling about, these two violent, mighty souls? It's as basic as a barroom brawl. They are quarreling over a woman. A girl, really. A girl stolen from her father. A girl abducted in a war. Now, Agamemnon much prefers this girl to his wife, Clytemnestra. 'Clytemnestra is not as good as she is,' he says, 'neither in face nor in figure.' That puts directly enough, does it not, why he doesn't want to give her up? When Achilles demands that Agamemnon return the girl to her father in order to assuage Apollo, the god who is murderously angry about the circumstances surrounding her abduction, Agamemnon refuses: he'll agree only if Achilles gives him *his* girl in exchange. Thus reigniting Achilles. Adrenal Achilles: the most highly flammable of

explosive wildmen any writer has ever enjoyed portraying; especially where his prestige and his appetite are concerned, the most hypersensitive killing machine in the history of warfare. Celebrated Achilles: alienated and estranged by a slight to his honor. Great heroic Achilles, who, through the strength of his rage at an insult—the insult of not getting the girl—isolates himself, positions himself defiantly outside the very society whose glorious protector he is and whose need of him is enormous. A quarrel, then, a brutal quarrel over a young girl and her young body and the delights of sexual rapacity: there, for better or worse, in this offense against the phallic entitlement, the phallic *dignity*, of a powerhouse of a warrior prince, is how the great imaginative literature of Europe begins, and that is why, close to three thousand years later, we are going to begin there today . . ."

Coleman was one of a handful of Jews on the Athena faculty when he was hired and perhaps among the first of the Jews permitted to teach in a classics department anywhere in America; a few years earlier, Athena's solitary Jew had been E. I. Lonoff, the all-but-forgotten short story writer whom, back when I was myself a newly published apprentice in trouble and eagerly seeking the validation of a master, I had once paid a memorable visit to here. Through the eighties and into the nineties, Coleman was also the first and only Jew ever to serve at Athena as dean of faculty; then, in 1995, after retiring as dean in order to round out his career back in the classroom, he resumed teaching two of his courses under the aegis of the combined languages and literature program that had absorbed the Classics Department and that was run by Professor Delphine Roux. As dean, and with the full support of an ambitious new president, Coleman had taken an antiquated, backwater, Sleepy Hollowish college and, not without steamrolling, put an end to the place as a gentlemen's farm by aggressively encouraging the deadwood among the faculty's old guard to seek early retirement, recruiting ambitious young assistant professors, and revolutionizing the curriculum. It's almost a certainty that had he retired, without

incident, in his own good time, there would have been the fest-schrift, there would have been the institution of the Coleman Silk Lecture Series, there would have been a classical studies chair established in his name, and perhaps—given his importance to the twentieth-century revitalization of the place—the humanities building or even North Hall, the college's landmark, would have been renamed in his honor after his death. In the small academic world where he had lived the bulk of his life, he would have long ceased to be resented or controversial or even feared, and, instead, officially glorified forever.

It was about midway into his second semester back as a full-time professor that Coleman spoke the self-incriminating word that would cause him voluntarily to sever all ties to the college—the single self-incriminating word of the many millions spoken aloud in his years of teaching and administering at Athena, and the word that, as Coleman understood things, directly led to his wife's death.

The class consisted of fourteen students. Coleman had taken attendance at the beginning of the first several lectures so as to learn their names. As there were still two names that failed to elicit a response by the fifth week into the semester, Coleman, in the sixth week, opened the session by asking, "Does anyone know these people? Do they exist or are they spooks?"

Later that day he was astonished to be called in by his successor, the new dean of faculty, to address the charge of racism brought against him by the two missing students, who turned out to be black, and who, though absent, had quickly learned of the locution in which he'd publicly raised the question of their absence. Coleman told the dean, "I was referring to their possibly ectoplasmic character. Isn't that obvious? These two students had not attended a single class. That's all I knew about them. I was using the word in its customary and primary meaning: 'spook' as a specter or a ghost. I had no idea what color these two students might be. I had known perhaps fifty years ago but had wholly forgotten that 'spooks' is an invidious term sometimes applied to blacks. Otherwise, since I am totally meticulous regarding student sensibilities, I would never

have used that word. Consider the context: Do they exist *or* are they spooks? The charge of racism is spurious. It is preposterous. My colleagues know it is preposterous and my students know it is preposterous. The issue, the only issue, is the nonattendance of these two students and their flagrant and inexcusable neglect of work. What's galling is that the charge is not just false—it is spectacularly false." Having said altogether enough in his defense, considering the matter closed, he left for home.

Now, even ordinary deans, I am told, serving as they do in a no man's land between the faculty and the higher administration, invariably make enemies. They don't always grant the salary raises that are requested or the convenient parking places that are so coveted or the larger offices professors believe they are entitled to. Candidates for appointments or promotion, especially in weak departments, are routinely rejected. Departmental petitions for additional faculty positions and secretarial help are almost always turned down, as are requests for reduced teaching loads and for freedom from early morning classes. Funds for travel to academic conferences are regularly denied, et cetera, et cetera. But Coleman had been no ordinary dean, and who he got rid of and how he got rid of them, what he abolished and what he established, and how audaciously he performed his job into the teeth of tremendous resistance succeeded in more than merely slighting or offending a few odd ingrates and malcontents. Under the protection of Pierce Roberts, the handsome young hotshot president with all the hair who came in and appointed him to the deanship—and who told him, "Changes are going to be made, and anybody who's unhappy should just think about leaving or early retirement"—Coleman had overturned everything. When, eight years later, midway through Coleman's tenure, Roberts accepted a prestigious Big Ten presidency, it was on the strength of a reputation for all that had been achieved at Athena in record time—achieved, however, not by the glamorous president who was essentially a fund-raiser, who'd taken none of the hits and moved on from Athena heralded and unscathed, but by his determined dean of faculty.

In the very first month he was appointed dean, Coleman had invited every faculty member in for a talk, including several senior professors who were the scions of the old county families who'd founded and originally endowed the place and who themselves didn't really need the money but gladly accepted their salaries. Each of them was instructed beforehand to bring along his or her c.v., and if someone didn't bring it, because he or she was too grand, Coleman had it in front of him on his desk anyway. And for a full hour he kept them there, sometimes even longer, until, having so persuasively indicated that things at Athena had at long last changed, he had begun to make them sweat. Nor did he hesitate to open the interview by flipping through the c.v. and saying, "For the last eleven years, just what *have* you been doing?" And when they told him, as an overwhelming number of the faculty did, that they'd been publishing regularly in *Athena Notes*, when he'd heard one time too many about the philological, bibliographical, or archaeological scholarly oddment each of them annually culled from an ancient Ph.D. dissertation for "publication" in the mimeographed quarterly bound in gray cardboard that was cataloged nowhere on earth but in the college library, he was reputed to have dared to break the Athena civility code by saying, "In other words, you people recycle your own trash." Not only did he then shut down *Athena Notes* by returning the tiny bequest to the donor—the father-in-law of the editor—but, to encourage early retirement, he forced the deadest of the deadwood out of the courses they'd been delivering by rote for the last twenty or thirty years and into freshman English and the history survey and the new freshman orientation program held during the hot last days of the summer. He eliminated the ill-named Scholar of the Year Prize and assigned the thousand dollars elsewhere. For the first time in the college's history, he made people apply formally, with a detailed project description, for paid sabbatical leave, which was more often than not denied. He got rid of the clubby faculty lunchroom, which boasted the most exquisite of the paneled oak interiors on the campus, converted it back into the honors seminar room it was intended to be,

and made the faculty eat in the cafeteria with the students. He insisted on faculty meetings—never holding them had made the previous dean enormously popular. Coleman had attendance taken by the faculty secretary so that even the eminences with the three-hour-a-week schedules were forced onto the campus to show up. He found a provision in the college constitution that said there were to be no executive committees, and arguing that those stodgy impediments to serious change had grown up only by convention and tradition, he abolished them and ruled these faculty meetings by fiat, using each as an occasion to announce what he was going to do next that was sure to stir up even more resentment. Under his leadership, promotion became difficult—and this, perhaps, was the greatest shock of all: people were no longer promoted through rank automatically on the basis of being popular teachers, and they didn't get salary increases that weren't tied to merit. In short, he brought in competition, he made the place competitive, which, as an early enemy noted, "is what Jews do." And whenever an angry ad hoc committee was formed to go and complain to Pierce Roberts, the president unfailingly backed Coleman.

In the Roberts years all the bright younger people he recruited loved Coleman because of the room he was making for them and because of the good people he began hiring out of graduate programs at Johns Hopkins and Yale and Cornell—"the revolution of quality," as they themselves liked to describe it. They prized him for taking the ruling elite out of their little club and threatening their self-presentation, which never fails to drive a pompous professor crazy. All the older guys who were the weakest part of the faculty had survived on the ways that they thought of themselves—the greatest scholar of the year 100 B.C., and so forth—and once those were challenged from above, their confidence eroded and, in a matter of a few years, they had nearly all disappeared. Heady times! But after Pierce Roberts moved on to the big job at Michigan, and Haines, the new president, came in with no particular loyalty to Coleman—and, unlike his predecessor, exhibiting no special tolerance for the brand of bulldozing vanity and autocratic ego that had

cleaned the place out in so brief a period—and as the young people Coleman had kept on as well as those he'd recruited began to become the veteran faculty, a reaction against Dean Silk started to set in. How strong it was he had never entirely realized until he counted all the people, department by department, who seemed to be not at all displeased that the word the old dean had chosen to characterize his two seemingly nonexistent students was definable not only by the primary dictionary meaning that he maintained was obviously the one he'd intended but by the pejorative racial meaning that had sent his two black students to lodge their complaint.

I remember clearly that April day two years back when Iris Silk died and the insanity took hold of Coleman. Other than to offer a nod to one or the other of them whenever our paths crossed down at the general store or the post office, I had not really known the Silks or anything much about them before then. I hadn't even known that Coleman had grown up some four or five miles away from me in the tiny Essex County town of East Orange, New Jersey, and that, as a 1944 graduate of East Orange High, he had been some six years ahead of me in my neighboring Newark school. Coleman had made no effort to get to know me, nor had I left New York and moved into a two-room cabin set way back in a field on a rural road high in the Berkshires to meet new people or to join a new community. The invitations I received during my first months out here in 1993—to come to a dinner, to tea, to a cocktail party, to trek to the college down in the valley to deliver a public lecture or, if I preferred, to talk informally to a literature class—I politely declined, and after that both the neighbors and the college let me be to live and do my work on my own.

But then, on that afternoon two years back, having driven directly from making arrangements for Iris's burial, Coleman was at the side of my house, banging on the door and asking to be let in. Though he had something urgent to ask, he couldn't stay seated