3

There I was the following day, strolling across campus headed for *Law & Lit*, a rumpled, tabbed, and well-thumbed copy of *Utopia* in hand. Perhaps if I were to read More's *Utopia* straight through in Latin, just once, I might not feel compelled to re-read it so often. But the seminar gave me an excuse to revisit the book at least once a year, so a Latin excursion probably wouldn't change anything.

A crowded little conference room, twenty students sitting with a springy attention as I walked in. *Very gratifying*, I thought. This was the only course I ever taught that had a wait list of students eager to gain admittance.

We disposed of the admin housekeeping and the ground rules for the seminar. *Ah, there*

was Bren, far left corner of the conference table, signing in on the roster. Then we jumped right into the discussion.

"*Utopia*. Thomas More. The only book we are going to read in this seminar by a practicing attorney." *They always loved this next part – well,* I *always loved this next part*. "And what an attorney! Heavy case load, as he reminds us at the beginning of the book, diplomatic trade missions, successively undersheriff of London, adviser to the King – ghostwriter to the King, if legend is to be believed – member of the King's council, knight, Speaker of the House of Commons, Lord Chancellor of England, convicted traitor, martyr, saint.

"In the course of this busy career, in his spare time he writes a little book, a tremendously ironic book, that becomes the fountainhead of an entire thematic tradition in world literature – utopian literature." *Oh, someone stirring to the right, woman with an odd tattoo on her left arm would like to ask a question, but obvi-*

ously uncomfortable interrupting. Hargreave was her name, I think. Preemptive strike called for. "Yes, you have something?"

"Oh," Ms. Hargreave says, startled by the invitation. "Yeah, well, I was just wondering if you could really, you know, put all those modern dystopias . . ." *there's that word again!* ". . . into the same time line as More's *Utopia*, because . . ."

"Books like what?" I interjected quietly.

"Oh, you know, like *1984*," *it's* Nineteen Eighty-Four*, actually, but I don't want to quibble, so I'll just think this and not say it out loud*, "and *Brave New World*, and you know, novels like that."

"I'm glad you asked that," I reply. *Somebody would, so we may as well deal with that now*. "I have to confess that I'm a little uncomfortable when literary critics refer to books like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as 'dystopias,' for two basic reasons." *Actually it's not so much discomfort as an uncontrolled screaming inside my head*. "First of

all, this term 'dystopia' implies a distinction between utopian novels and dystopian novels that is extraordinarily misleading. As you probably already know, this fanciful term that More dreamt up from Greek roots – 'utopia' – means 'not a place,' or 'no place,' or 'nowhere.' By the same token, this term 'dystopia' means 'bad place.' And that's the source of the false distinction – the world of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or the World State in *Brave New World*, is not a *bad place* – it's a futuristic *no place*."

"Yeah, but professor, they're both set in England," piped up a fellow – *Stanton?* – across the table from me.

"Not any England that actually exists, not a place any more real than Utopia," I snapped back. *Saw that one coming, I did*. "If you want to see a dystopia, you have to read Voltaire's *Candide*. He sets Candide's adventures in real time, with contemporary events driving the plot – the Seven Years' War devastates the Bar-

on's family and estates; religious persecution wracks two hemispheres; the Lisbon Earthquake shatters faith. The point is that *this* world is a bad place, and the best we can hope to do is to endure and 'cultivate our garden.' "

"But Candide visits El Dorado in South America, and that's not a real place," Mr. Stanton shot back. *I'm going to get nowhere if they are going to read ahead*.

"You're absolutely right!" I responded. *It always confuses them when you agree with them*. "And El Dorado is every bit as 'utopian' as More's Utopia – or Oceania. Fanciful, ironic, and intended to make the reader contrast the utopian space with the 'real' world. This brings us back to the point I was trying to make. In most of this literary tradition, it's not utopia versus dystopia, it's one fanciful utopia against another."

"OK, but still, professor," insisted Ms. Hargreave, "You have to admit that utopia – I mean, you know, More's Utopia or Voltaire's

El Dorado – is very different from *1984 . . .*" *it's Nineteen Eighty-Four, you understand* ". . . you understand?"

"Yes and no. And what I mean here leads me to my second problem with this terminology. Pushing this distinction between utopias and dystopias makes for a very simplistic reading of More's *Utopia*, it's almost insulting to More as an author and a thinker."

"Uh, lost me there," piped up the fellow sitting to Hargreave's right – Mr. Doyle, I recall. *Think about it, Doyle*.

"Think about it this way. If it's accurate to talk about utopias and dystopias as competing approaches in this literary tradition – or maybe as separate literary traditions – then we're saying that More's Utopia – the country in the novel – is the good witch, and Oceania is the wicked witch. And that makes More a creator of good little place, quite unlike that terrible Oceania or the World State. That's awfully unfair to More. Maybe the problem is that *Utopia*

long ago entered the ranks of 'most often cited, least often read.' We don't really confront More's novel on its own terms, and we entertain very simple-minded ideas about what's going on there. Utopia is a very scary place. A highly regimented, almost affectless population, cynical use of military power, outright slavery, unrelenting manipulation of the population – that may be a description of life in Orwell's war-ridden Oceania, but it most certainly describes life in Utopia."

"But I thought More used the term 'utopia' not just to mean 'no place' but also to mean a 'good place,' " Mr. Doyle replied. "The book says . . ." *I knew what was coming.*

"You mean the *Introduction* to our edition says," I corrected him in anticipation.

". . . that the term 'utopia' is a pun – you know, 'utopia' and 'eutopia' – 'no place' and 'good place.' "

"You won't find that in the novel. It's critic-speak." I replied. "And we're talking about a

place described admiringly by a character named 'Hythloday,' which means 'peddler of nonsense.' What exactly did you think More was up to when he picked that name? You have to ask yourself, honestly, would you really want to live in the kind of society that More's book describes – any more than you would want to live in Oceania, with its constant state of war? I know I wouldn't."

"But I thought More was a religious man."

"Very much so, but there's no indication that Hythloday was, and he is the one who admires Utopia so much."

"But he's More's character!"

"That he is, and so is the 'More' who appears in *Utopia*, a man who equivocates over the things that Hythloday describes. You have to wrap your mind around the fact that, in a very real sense, *Utopia*, though it's almost five centuries old, is really a post-modernist novel. It is hyper-aware of itself as a work of fiction, written by a man who inserts himself into the

novel as narrator, but always with a heavy dose of irony – what else can you call it when the actual author appears in the novel he is writing as a character with the author's actual background and biography? What is it he has the More-character say in the letter that begins the novel? 'I would rather say something inaccurate than tell a lie, because I would rather be honest than clever.' You have to ask yourself – What is More-the-author doing, and what is More-the-character saying? What could be more clever than that?"

This is always the dangerous point in the discussion. Have I lost them? Or are they finally starting to think? And if they are starting to think, will that lead to my losing them?

I looked around the table, and I noticed that they had all stopped taking notes. Pens no longer flowed without pause across notebooks; fingers had stopped tapping away on notebooks too. *Time for a break,* I thought.

"Alright, then. Time for a break. Let's restore circulation," I told them, as we all stretched mind and body in relief.