

## COMMITTEE

By

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The room was as clean as it was sterile, the distinction between those two states being unknown to the people who walked into it. As was their habit, profession and passion, they procedurally took their seats at the table. The red carpet was warmer than usual, the air a bit denser with fog, but then again, it was August. The reason for the gathering was not planned by any of the committee members, a cause of disturbance to most, a 'challenge' to the chairman.

Mr. King was a rebel, having worn a suit only on austere occasions such as funerals, readings of Wills, or weddings. "Wild William" King was a grey slacks and blue blazer kind of guy, who appended that 'rebel wear' with mildly wide ties of various, non-offensive colors. Calm and collected, he took his seat at the head of the table and waited for the other members of the committee to take their places. "Before we get started," he reminded everyone, "we have to remember that it is about the process not the product. And our job is to assess rather than go ahead and do ANYthing without a clear, defined and thoroughly examined plan."

Everyone else in the room agreed, despite the rumblings from people on the floors below them that emergency action was to be taken on the matter at hand. Mr. Green, a patent attorney by training, a wannabe inventor by passion, spoke up first regarding the manner at hand, subtly loosening the top button of his shirt as he felt a wave of heat coming up from his neck. "Everyone in my office told me that they wanted the matter at hand dealt with quickly. And some of them so raise some very valid points regarding such," he squeaked out, thinking it to be a roar.

"If those people had the credentials to know what to do, they would have been appointed positions at this table," Doctor Black, Professor of Contemporary Literature commented snidely in the 'Old English' manner which had become his trademark. "Those 'people.' are interesting subjects, though," he continued, stroking the carefully trimmed goatee on his chin with his left hand while putting his unlit pipe into his lips with his right.

"So, they'll be the subject of your next book?" Professor White, head of the Behavioral Psychology department, inquired with a smart-assed grin disguised as one of comradeship.

"Yes, quite," Doctor Black snickered, knowing fully well that he had not written anything original in 8 years, yet being completely aware that as long as his satirical digs at other authors were colorful, he could still be respected in the circles that provided him with pipe and tweed jacket money, as well as purpose.

From the tail end of the table, a high pitched voice rang out with a sense of urgency. “We have to deal with this, now, I propose,” Professor Gina Redd-Blue offered. She seemed to be hot under the collar as well, but for reasons she dared not raise, particularly to anyone at this table. After all, being cool, detached and emotionally distanced from the people she was supposed to serve is what escalated her from being an RN schlepping around meds and bedpans to becoming the Dean of Nursing.

“So what is your proposal?” Mr. Green asked with a stone-cold face.

“You mean what is your ‘proposition’”, Doctor Black affirmed to his colleagues, pointing to the secretary taking notes to made the appropriate adjustment in the minutes.

“The proposition is that this university is on the verge of destruction unless we do something very quickly,” ‘Nurse Gina’ reminded the group in a firm but not threatening motherly tone. “At least according to our constituents,” she continued as Professor Red-Blue.

“‘Constituents’ is a political term, Gina,” Doctor Black reminded her.

“And university administration isn’t a political entity?” she offered.

Silence permeated the room, a disapproving hush that drove Gina into feeling not only left out, but perhaps banished. She dared not apologize for calling things as they were, as it would be an even bigger admission of guilt, or worse, inefficiency. She felt the heat of the room as well, escalating around her like a torrent of steam that connected her with the blackish fog outside. Then again, blackish fog was just something that happened in New Jersey.

Breaking the tension, as was his assigned job, was Mr. King. “We do have to address this issue, I know, but do we know all of the facts?”

“And the permutation of those facts, if any of them are followed through?” Mr. White offered.

“We should initiate a resolution to discuss the feasibility of a multi-disciplinary subcommittee to investigate the matter so they can bring it to this committee,” Mr. King proposed, as fact, looking around the room to see who would volunteer to be the members of this sub-committee. “Takers?” he asked everyone, except, Nurse Gina.

The only hand raised was that of Gina, her slender, delicate fingers pointed upwards like a cat prepared to become a lioness.

“Second?” Mr. King asked the group.

Doctor Black raised his hand, facing down Gina, as he knew she wasn’t up to the task at hand. But then again, such was part of the master plan anyway. Gina was as inefficient

at gathering facts that would insure action as anyone else in the Committee. But she was very good at procedure, and as even her nurses in training were told, 'it's the process not the product'. Illogical as it was, it did produce 67 nurses every year who knew and implemented every procedure dictated by the doctors over them.

"So, when will your committee get back to our committee with regard to the proposal?" Mr. King asked Gina.

"Proposition!" Doctor Black insisted, yet again. "We do have to maintain standards of language."

Meanwhile, the ethers around the room and under it seemed to get darker. Professor White got another call from his secretary, demanding action from the group upstairs. "We're dealing with it, appropriately" he related, assured, then in an autocratic tone made even more aggressive by its evenness of tone, blasted at her. He hung up the phone, sweat running down his neck. Moving his hand to unbutton another collar and loosen his tie, he noticed that he was being watched. With a fake smile, he tightened the tie and secured the buttons tightly around his beet red neck. "Never let them see you sweat," he thought, but didn't say as he reached for a glass of water, sipping it down, though he would have preferred to gulp it, knowing fully well that the water would have been far better used elsewhere, as it related to the proposition, or proposal, at hand.

"So, it is customary to have subcommittees submit their assessment to the evaluatory committees in two weeks," Mr. King stated, knowing fully well that Dr. Black or Counciller Green would correct him on the term 'evaluatory'. But they didn't do so. Instead, Professor White brought up a point which had become custom, habit then intrinsic biological law for the committee.

"Two weeks is customary for evaluations and examination of any unforeseen permutations of premature or ill advised decisions," he commented. "But we are dealing with what is an emergency situation of unprecedented peril, according to all of our constituents."

"Correction!" Doctor Black forced into the evolving agenda with rise in volume and lowering of pitch to his already baritone, non-musical voice. "I find it odd that TWO of us here are referring to those who answer to this committee as 'constituents.'"

"I then move to propose, and/or offer a proposition, that we officially call them something else," Mr. Green spouted out with his chin held very upright, his throat feeling dryer and somehow very dangerously parched. He gulped down his glass of water, hoping that it would make it better, but it didn't. He cleared his throat, looked out the window at the every blackening Jersey sky, and then quickly opened up his twenty pound legal binder containing more small print than anyone could read in a lifetime, much less understand. Still, he had to make his own position, and worth, understood to the committee, an entity which for him had become more important than family,

particularly when that family decided he wasn't its only chairman. "I SUGGEST, that we call those 'under' us, who we have a mandate to serve, and who are entitled to use every legal and financial means at their disposal to depose any of us at any time....'citizens'."

"This is a university," Dr. Black chuckled. "Everyone who we allow entry to..."

"To whom we allow entry," Professor Gina Red-Blue smiled back, asking the secretary to record it appropriately in a cordial, yet firm inwardly-self-satisfying Hillary Clinton nod.

"Everyone TO WHOM we allow entry into this university is by unofficial definition above being a common citizen, Secretary of State Red-Blue," Dr. Black continued. "And I put it to 'President' King, that we should adopt a different structural frame of cultural reference to this, as we are not patterned after nor do we directly answer to any National political party or federal agency."

"Yes, we are a PRIVATE University," Mr. King acknowledged, stroking his chin five times, uncomfortable about the amount of sweat that was under it. "With freedom to work within the law, and the ability to be sued for all we have by any lawyers. Particularly if we do something that offends any of their clients."

"We are dealing with a state of unprecedented and immediate emergency," Nurse Gina reminded her 'Prez' with another Hillary tilt of the head, matching perfectly with new hairdo she had obtained for her position on the committee.

"Which is why we should define terms very clearly here, Gina," Dr. Black reminded her in a tone which was elitist on the outside, but vulnerable on the inside. "It is the process not necessarily the product, after all!" he reminded everyone else. He glanced outside, across the street, at a homeless person sleeping on the sidewalk, which was not more black than grey. "There but for fortune or a dissatisfied alumnus who can stir up the pot with the interdepartmental division of deans go I," he thought, and even wrote as the first line of that novel which he never continued, nor shared with anyone else in the room. Able, and pathologically lucky, survivor that he was, Dr. Black raised the next point. "We should refer to those who serve us, and who we serve from this position of authority in this alleged state of un-paralleled emergency as...hmm."

"Employees?" Professor White suggested.

"That would infer a corporate structure, and we are an educational institution," Mr. Green offered. "With a historical legacy that goes back hundreds of years."

"So we should call them serfs?" Professor White offered, first in Russian to impress the group, then in English for the other 'commoners' around the table.

"Interesting analogy," Nurse Gina smiled, knowing the gag to be vicious, yet true. But she was grateful that Professor White decided to speak from his mind rather than from

the Mission statement, big M, which the committee had put on paper, and ingrained into the heads of all of its members. And at the bottom of it all, there as one Mission Statement that was never to be spoken of, but always incorporated into every proposal, or proposition, even in Emergency situations. “Can we call them...patients, for the moment, for the sake of philosophical discourse and multidisciplinary assessment?” she offered.

Nods of approval from all of the members of the committee surrounded Nurse Gina, making her feel comfortable, respected and even liked.. Mr. King remained motionless, which she took as his approval to continue.

“The patients are in need of immediate action for the emergency situation at hand,” she continued.

“Or immediate WANT?” Dr Black challenged.

“Want and need are often indistinguishable, their definition depending on whether seeking the desired goal is in keeping with an accepted code of pan-theological ethics and morality, my fellow ‘doctors’,” Mr. White offered, finding himself referring to ‘Nurse’ Gina as a Doctor. She knew as much about the medical condition of people as anyone else in the wards, but because she had not obtained a Ph.D., it was still just ‘Nurse Gina’, or Professor Redd-Blue. Yes, Mr. White and ‘Ms’ Redd had no shortage of unsettled issues between then, even before she hyphinated it after her divorced herself from her grubby, hubby Doctor Blue. On the surface, it was about allocation of funds to each of their divisions, but under the smiles and nods, it was jihad of the highest order. And, to be accurate, something that they enjoyed far more than they admitted to themselves, their drinking buds, or shrinks.

Mr. White’s remark about defining want and need got everyone else looking at their notes, the bylaws, and the pieces of blank paper in back of everyone’s folder. At least for Dr. Black and Mr. Green. Mr. King, at the head of table, remained motionless. The position from which he spoke most forcefully and approvingly.

Another call came in. This time to the stenographer. She said nothing but a few calm, yet very concerned ‘hhmmms’. The caller’s line stopped, abruptly. She wrote down the important points, then distributed them around to everyone. Then, as soon as she could, and as quietly, she got up, and left. It was the first time she had done so.

The heat in the room was now sweltering, the air conditioning no match for the other structural problems emerging. The committee members seemed concerned now, but not because of the black air which now penetrated through the window that finally broke open, nor the screams of the ‘patients’, ‘citizens’ and ‘serfs’ below, nor even their own overheated bodies and smoke-invaded lungs.

Only one line in the room was still functional, an old rotary phone that had served more historical than functional purposes. Gina got up and picked it up, knowing what she had

to do. But Dr. Black pulled out the line. “This committee has a mandate! The most important mandate!” he asserted.

“I know,” Gina said. “To evaluate everything and never actual do anything,” she said in Latin, which made it sound scholarly, then in English, which made it sound...scary.

She looked at Mr. King, who had apparently lived that mandate to the end. Indeed he was dead, as would be many many more, eight stories below. Particularly because no one decided to call the fire department.

All of the committee members assessed the situation, and the professional consequences of doing anything rash, or responsible. And it was the matter of responsibility that won out in the flash decision to plug the phone back in and make the call to the fire department. Unfortunately, it was too late. The building collapsed, bringing the committee king, princes and princess down to the ground in a loud thump. As it was Saturday after ‘normal’ working hours, not many people noticed. The fire department did come by, and saved who they could. As for what the cause of the fire and the enormity of its damage...the issue was sent to committee for evaluation.