

Extinction

~ Robert Thomas ~

Sandy sat upright and somewhat intense, as always, her head and neck projecting slightly over the table.

“I think we're all here so let's begin. I'm very conscious of the need to stick to the allocated time, given that we're all very busy. The purpose of this meeting is to finalise the submission for the Dignified Option Initiative.”

Sandy was very young for a director, maybe in her mid-to-late thirties. In fact she was one of the youngest people around. She was pretty and always professionally dressed, with almost no makeup. A considerable leather portfolio, with the submission on one side and a pad on the other, rested neatly in front of her, arms arranged smartly either side, expensive ballpoint studiously in hand.

“Let me start by saying that I think Jake and Stephen have done an excellent job on this and kudos to them for all their hard work. I realise the circumstances of this submission have been difficult and unusual, and especially the cone of silence we've all had to deal with. But as usual you guys did an amazing job and I'm very proud of you. And I think my views will be echoed by the minister.”

Jake sat directly across from Sandy. He was looking at her intently, but not because of what she was saying or how she looked. It simply amused Jake to stare at Sandy while she spoke with such intensity and self importance, and in perfect tedious cadence. He did not mirror her physical posture, though, contrary to good practice. He slouched in the padded chair, back a bit from the table, his big, bulky form content and immovable. Jake long ago gave up looking prim.

Jake thought, *echoed by the minister?* It hasn't gotten out of the division yet. The minister's office knows about it. Was their idea. But heck, the minister won't even read it.

“Now Jake,” Sandy continued, opening the submission, “I don't think much has changed since our last meeting a week ago. Perhaps you could point us to any changes you and Stephen have made.”

“My pleasure Sandy.”

Jake diverted his stair downward, to the well-thumbed document on his knee.

“Aside from the usual typos and grammar and format and such, you instructed us to revise the assumptions for long-term savings or return on investment.”

Jake looked up at Sandy.

“Now as I said in my email, I'm not a financial expert and don't pretend to have done a lot of return-on-investment analysis, and such calculations are difficult in this particular case.”

“No, I understand that, Jake. I just thought we could be a bit more generous in some of our assumptions. One way this can be a good news story is by highlighting savings for taxpayers in future years.”

“So the assumption we revised was take-up rate among the target population.”

“Eligible population.”

“I'm sorry, eligible population.”

“OK, so you've made those changes. Anything else?”

“The additions to the background section that you wanted were made. Now it includes the standard scientific explanation.”

Jake kept flipping.

“The stakeholder analysis changed to include what we're calling the potential clinical administrator group. And of course Liz sent over her final revised communications plan.”

“And Liz," Sandy broke in, "anything to add – First of all, Liz, I want to extend my thanks and praise to you and your team for doing an absolutely wonderful job on this. It looks really good and of course, per usual highlights the key messages extremely clearly and extremely well. If this submission succeeds, I think we can all agree that it will in no small part be due to your excellent communications plan.”

“Of course, Sandy, it's been an absolute pleasure working with you and your branch.”

Liz was older, at least middle-aged. Jake had never dealt with her before, but she was assigned to the file for her experience. She was always smiling, and smiled while she talked. This was something Jake, well, simply loathed. But he loathed communications people generally.

“So the communications plan component is good, then?”

“I can tell you, Sandy, that this submission has entailed significant communications challenges, but I think we have it down-pat. Now the minister's office communications staff can of course change and revise the plan. But I think we've arrived at very good key messages.”

“No, I think so too, well done.”

And now Stephen interjected, after clearing his throat. His comments at these meetings were always preceded by a perfunctory, brief throat clearing. Stephen was Jake's manager. He'd been deeply involved all along and he and Jake basically wrote the submission.

“I think what's important in terms of the communications piece is that this is an optional program. We're not forcing anyone to do anything. I like how you call it 'optional and dignified withdrawal'. I also like how

you emphasise and support the importance of families in the decision-making process.”

“I agree completely,” confirmed Sandy.

“Uh, true,” now Jake again, “I’m not convinced though that the optional aspect will make the proposal any more acceptable to some of our stakeholders. For instance, these do not have to be individuals suffering from severe or terminal illness.”

Stephen looked at Jake, with a slight nod.

“And I think that point has been thoroughly discussed throughout the drafting process,” replied Sandy, looking at Jake with a slightly condescending eye. “I think it’s fair to say that reactions of stakeholders have to be managed.”

Sandy turned to Simon, who was sitting slightly isolated from the others, several chairs down the long table.

“Simon, you can confirm that the legal aspects have been dealt with, right? I mean at this late stage in the game, we’re not going to open that discussion up again.”

Simon was the oldest in the room, by far. He was from the ministry’s legal services branch. He had not seemed engaged in the conversation up to this point. He always attended these review meetings, just because of the nature of the submission. But some time ago he gave the required opinion. He’d been leaning back with his legs crossed. After a pause, as if he had not expected to say anything, he sat up and moved a bit closer.

“That’s basically right. This is an optional program. Full consent of the client is required, and where applicable of family members acting on behalf of the client. And since it is optional, no constitutional issues arise. And of course Jake, as you say in your Required Legislative Changes section, the minister would introduce legislation to make the process fully legal. And regulations would follow prescribing the steps

that would have to be taken in each case, to administer the procedure. So I think that the legal considerations have been dealt with. As Sandy says, stakeholder management is a separate issue, though a very important one for this initiative.”

“But I would still get ready for a constitutional challenge.”

“We'll be on top of that.”

"And certainly for other negative stakeholder reaction," Jake continued. "As I said, this option as we call it is not just applicable in cases of severe or terminal illness."

Sandy interrupted, “so moving along, then, I think we're basically ready for sign-off, unless anyone can think of any other issues that need to be discussed that haven't been covered already.”

“Just to Jake's point,” said Liz, moving forward and crossing her arms on the table.

“As the communications lead on this, I fully appreciate the novelty and potential controversy of this initiative. I think we all do. I also think that none of us likes the fact that we have to move forward with a submission of this kind. But given what's been happening to our society, given current social and economic realities, I sincerely think that this kind of issue needs to be aired in public and that it is going to be aired at some point. In terms of our stakeholders, we have developed a very well-laid-out communications plan specifically designed to identify and address and manage concerns that we anticipate from individual stakeholder groups. It's not up to us to manage these stakeholders but to the minister and his political colleagues. All we can do is enable that messaging and support the process and help to manage the controversy so that the best outcome can be achieved.”

“We in policy do appreciate that communications and messaging is where the rubber hits the road,” conceded Stephen.

Jake ignored Simon's comment and was looking at Liz, somewhat bemused.

“I don't deny the ability of communications branch to develop messaging and assist politicians in stakeholder management,” he intoned. “I just think the public would react more favourably if the proposal were put forward by the minister in the context of a general policy discussion, maybe a white paper, and not as a specific program for immediate implementation.”

“Well, you've brought that up before, Jake,” replied Sandy officiously, “and it's a good point but the minister's office thinks differently.” She was eager to finish up. Liz just continued to lean forward, looking vacant.

“So,” continued Sandy, “if that's all, Stephen, do you think you can have the red approval file ready by end of day?”

“Sure.”

“Great. Thank you very much everyone.” And the meeting adjourned. Sandy left first, hurriedly (she always walked around in a hurry, with loud, clunking steps) followed by Liz, who caught up with her. There was fading banter. Stephen gathered up the submission and some other relevant papers he'd brought along in case he needed them.

“OK. It'll be good to finish this and move on,” he said, getting up. Jake stayed in his chair, looking across to the opposite wall.

Stephen stopped at the door, and turned to Jake, awkwardly.

“Coming?”

“Yeah.” Jake raised his heavy frame, pushing down on his arm rests, the rolled-up submission still in one hand. He walked to the door.

“Good job, Jake.” Stephen patted Jake's shoulder as he passed.

They walked together to the end of the corridor.

“Can you believe the gobbly gook that comes out of Liz's mouth?” asked Jake suddenly.

Stephen took out his access card and opened the door.

“Well, that's communications people for you,” he said with a chuckle.

“And certain directors are no better,” replied Jake, looking at Stephen with a reciprocating smirk.

It was a cool Spring afternoon. Jake always took the streetcar home. He lived not that far from the office, about midtown. He could usually get a seat, even during rush hour. The number of transit riders had been going down in recent years. But there was talk of cutting services, so eventually the cars might fill up again and he would have to stand like he used to.

A glum silence prevailed. It usually did in any public place. A vast glumness. Or maybe he was just being sentimental, Jake thought. Maybe he knew too much and it affected him. He was too involved. Most people probably didn't care so much. But now the submission was written, and off to approvals. It would still be highly confidential. The deputy minister's office had been told by the minister's office, and of course the assistant deputy minister knew, and in both cases their immediate staff. But Jake was glad it was over and hoped it didn't come back for revisions.

Jake would probably be linked to the initiative by his colleagues in the policy branch. They had already been ribbing him about his “black ops” assignment. But they were all professional public servants and no one would hold it against Jake. He was doing his job. Any invective would be directed at the minister, and certainly this would be the case in public, once the initiative was announced. Or maybe not. Had he done his job

too well? He had been selected for the assignment for his skills. Stephen had told him so. Jake remembered being called into Stephen's office. Very exciting. Sandy was there too.

He was taken aback when they briefed him, though. At first he didn't think they were serious. He and Liz would carry it. And it was very important. And it would give Jake lots of exposure and profile and would be a great career opportunity.

The streetcar lunged from stop to stop. Jake glanced at the school they passed every day. It was boarded up. Most schools were. There was probably one remaining open in the city. This one was a squat, red brick building. Jake tried to picture it teeming with young people. But all the windows were covered in sheets of plywood, in various stages of decay and defacement. The surrounding asphalt was criss-crossed by weed-grown fissures and scattered with assorted refuse. Jake could seldom help looking at the school. He feared it might not be there much longer. They would pull it down and put something else up, maybe. Construction labour was hard to come by. But they might just bulldoze it and put in a nice park. They'd done that with other schools. He didn't want this to happen. He thought of it as part of a heritage, like a cherished ruin. We need to be reminded of what it was like once, that places like this were human and vibrant and living and held our future.

But it still held our future. Just a very different one.

A slight commotion distracted Jake from his window-gazing, an excited shuffling. A young person had energetically boarded the car. A young man. Quite young, Jake thought. Even younger than Sandy and Josh. Maybe twenty-five. That's a very small cohort. You didn't see many people in their early twenties anymore. He was a tall boy, thin, with black trousers and a stylish belt and a collared shirt and vest and navy blue jacket. His hair was nicely combed. He wore black leather shoes. Slung across his shoulder was a leather attache case, which his left hand rested carelessly on, while his right grasped one of the poles.

The boy had a thin, freckled, intelligent face which displayed a slight,

self-conscious grin, which almost made him look intense. No wonder. He would be stared at almost anywhere he went. This was probably his natural reaction by now. He seemed aware of his importance. A number of the other passengers smiled at him, a few nodded. He didn't acknowledge. He simply shifted his glance from place to place. Did he work? Jake hoped not. But youngsters in his cohort must become very mature, very quickly, since they would mostly know only with older people, often considerably older. Unless of course he belonged to one of those colonies.

Jake came to his stop and got out. His house was only a short walk away, in a quiet neighbourhood tucked in behind the main street. His wife, Jenny, was home, watching television, drink in hand. She was a real-estate agent by training, and still worked, though of course her emphasis had shifted to condominiums and the volume was inevitably going down year over year. The house was a semi-detached with three bedrooms and a small yard.

The front porch really needed a fresh coat of paint. The house itself was tastefully decorated – Jenny was good at that sort of thing. But the hardwood floors needed refinishing, and the small patch of grass out back was just a mess. It seemed there was little enthusiasm left for major work, though. There was no guarantee anyone would be available to buy the place, if they stayed there many more years.

Jake sat down on the couch beside Jenny.

“Hi,” she said.

"Sandy signed off on the submission."

“Okay. It's over then?”

“I hope it doesn't come back. Or I hope it comes back with a note to shred the damn thing.”

Jake extended a hand to Jenny's knee and rubbed it gently. She was also

overweight, but not by as much as Jake. She had a round, pleasant face and wavy, reddish hair.

He looked at Jenny.

"I saw a boy on the streetcar today."

"Oh yeah?"

"How many drinks have you had?"

No answer.

"Jenny, how's Josh doing?"

"He's your nephew."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty seven, I think."

"I think this kid was younger."

"Yeah?"

"I wish I could see Josh more."

"Call your sister."

"He's a nice boy."

"Call your sister."

"She doesn't like me."

"Fine."

“Is he still with that youth colony?”

“Call your sister. She would know.”

Jake got up and went to the kitchen to get a beer. The kitchen was just behind the main living room where Jenny sat.

“Dad's birthday is next week,” he said as he opened the fridge.

“Oh yeah. So call your sister and arrange something.”

“She never thinks of Dad's birthday.”

Jake moved back to the couch.

“The eligible population – the target population – is anyone over seventy-five.”

“So?”

“Mom and Dad both qualify.”

Jenny looked at Jake.

“But they wouldn't go for it.”

Jake took a long sip from the bottle, then looked at Jenny.

“Darling, I wouldn't even ask them or ever tell them about it. But someone else might. Nothing prevents disclosure of the program – deliberate disclosure for the purpose of information – to an individual in the target population by a person who is not related to the individual, even in cases where the individual is under someone else's care. These people are old. Many families are callous. How many people in those old-folks homes almost never get visited?

Think of the savings for people who only care about their own comfort in

this dying world. And think of the savings to government, not having to support all these old people with a shrinking tax base. Our cost projections for savings in medical services alone were huge, aside from the cost of nursing home subsidies, even at moderate take-up. Do you know over fifty percent of the lifetime medical expenses related to an individual are incurred in the last six months of life?

There is such a thing as psychological pressure bearing on old and frail minds, Jenny. And it will be effective pressure on the minds of those who are less educated and less aware. And as time moves on, who's going to care?"

Jenny continued to look at the television.

"I guess. Why didn't you tell them?"

"I did. And both the pros and cons of the chosen option are discussed in the submission, but only briefly. Believe me, once the minister's office has indicated a course of action, any options analysis becomes perfunctory."

"What about Stephen?"

"He did what he could. He has a career to think about, I guess. Anyway he seems resigned to it. My major concern is that it will gradually become mandatory. This is a slippery slope. If the procedure becomes widespread enough or routine enough, it will become mandatory. And believe me, we're going to reach a point where no one's going to care much about constitutional niceties anymore."

"Oh well, we'll all be there eventually."

"Yeah, then it will be stopped. Once constitutional niceties become meaningless, it'll be stopped, for the last remaining privileged few. They'll allow themselves to live forever if they can arrange it."

"In the colonies?"

“Something like that.”

There was an awkward silence and soon they both turned their attention to the TV set.

“So what about your parent's birthday?” asked Jenny eventually.

“I'll call Sarah and try to arrange something at the steakhouse. She'll come for Dad.”

“Try to make sure Josh is there.”

“I'll do my best. Buy the way, if the ministry ever decided to actually charge the individual for the procedure, which might happen eventually, would Veterans' Affairs cover Dad?”

Jake was slightly startled when the phone rang, although he was expecting it. He'd been occupying his thoughts clearing e-mail. But he was slightly nervous.

“Hello.”

“Hello, son.”

“Hello Dad, how are you?”

“I'm fine, son.”

“Are you in the lobby?”

“Yes we're in the lobby.”

“Why don't you come up and I'll show you my office.”

“Sure.” Dad's voice rose with excitement. “That would be nice, Jake.”

“OK, I'm on the eighth floor. I'll meet you up here by the elevators.”

“Eighth floor, right, see you then.” And Dad hung up.

Jake rose from his chair, with difficulty as usual, and left his tidy cubicle. It was six o'clock. He'd stayed late for this. He glanced towards Stephen's office, which was not far away. The door was still open. He then walked toward Sandy's office, around some intervening cubicles and past the printing room. Her door was also open. That was expected, since Sandy rarely left before seven.

He walked quickly to the elevator lobby. It was a few minutes before one of them opened.

“Here it is.” Jake heard his dad's voice clearly.

A robust figure emerged, walking slowly, with a keen, wrinkled face and a full head of grey hair. Dad wore a knee-length leather jacket, grey trousers and a red sweater. He looked good. Not far behind was Mom, just slightly shorter. She had a beaming smile, and wore a fur coat and cap. She never liked the cold air. Her face was gentle and somewhat youthful looking, despite her age.

“Hi guys,” said Jake with excitement.

“Hello, son,” answered Dad, shaking Jake's hand firmly.

“Careful, old guy, you'll break my arm.”

“Damn right I will,” said Dad with a laugh.

Jake moved over to his mother and hugged her hard.

“Good to see you again, darling,” she said, giving him a long kiss on the

cheek.”

“It's really good to see you guys again. Look, why don't you come see my office and meet some of my colleagues.”

“Sure, son.”

“That would be great, darling.”

Soon they were through the access door and in the open area in front of the reception desk.

“So here it is, this is our branch. I don't know who's around. Come and see my cubicle”

Jake escorted them a short distance. The cubicle was tidier than most, and reasonably spacious. It was next to a large window, which was an added bonus.

“How nice, Jake,” said Mom. “You're so tidy at work.”

“Oh,” said Dad, beaming at Jake, “what a nice place to work, son.”

“Why don't you guys wait here. I'll go see if I can find Stephen my manager.”

Jake walked quickly toward Stephen's office, but he was already emerging.

“I hear some young voices, Jake,” he said with a smile.

“I'd like you to meet my parents.”

“Of course.”

They walked back to Jake's cubicle, where Mom and Dad were milling around. Dad had already started leafing curiously through a document

pinned to one of the cubicle walls.

“Guys, I'd like you to meet my manager, Stephen.”

“How do you do, Mr. and Mrs. Petersen?”

“So you finally got this guy to do some work, did you? said Dad, still holding Stephen's hand.

“When I'm lucky, Mr. Petersen,” said Stephen with a chuckle.

“Oh we know he's your best man,” retorted Mom.

“He is, you know. They don't come much better than Jake. Your son is a man of real integrity.”

“He gets it from me,” said Dad. They laughed.

“So what brings you folks here tonight?” asked Stephen.

“Well, it's Dad's birthday today, and we're going to our favourite steakhouse downtown. I thought we'd meet me here since they live in the burbs.”

“That's great. It certainly makes it easier.”

Jake looked at Stephen. “Do you know if Sandy's still around. I might as well introduce her too.”

“Of course, Jake. She's usually in still.”

“Alright, then.” Turning to his parents, “you guys wait here. I'm sure my director would love to meet you.”

Soon Jake was standing at Sandy's door. She didn't seem to have heard any of the banter, or if she had, she'd ignored it.

“Sorry to interrupt you, Sandy, but my parents are here. Would you like to meet them?”

“Sure I would,” she replied, turning her head away from her monitor and smiling.

She got up and followed Jake toward his cubicle, where his parents and Stephen were still chatting.

“So this is my director, Sandy. She's the big boss.”

Dad's face beamed, “hello, young lady, pleasure to meet you,” extending his hand.

"A pleasure to meet you, too, Mr. Peterson."

Mom approached, “hello, love, Jake has told us about you.”

“Oh really, I hope he was nice.”

“So how do you put up with my son?” inquired Dad.

“Oh he's no problem, Stephen keeps him in line. I just take the credit for all his fine work.”

“Good for you.”

“And what brings you two to these parts? Just visiting?”

“It's my birthday,” Dad announced proudly.

“That's great, and Jake is taking you out to celebrate, I guess?”

“Yes, we met him here. We took a taxi in.”

“And why don't you tell Sandy and Stephen how old your are, Dad?”

“Awe, they don't want to know that.”

“Sure they do. I won't ask Mom to tell.”

Dad straightened up in mocking pride and put his hand on his chest.

“I'm eighty one.”

“Eighty one! And still going strong, eh?” said Jake, looking at Sandy.

“Well, I'm sure you'll have many more happy years,” she concurred.

“Damn right I will.”

“He's just getting started,” said Mom, laughing.

“And you must be *much* younger, Mrs. Petersen, from the looks of you.”

“Oh yes, darling, I'm thirty-nine.”

They chuckled.

“Well,” said Jake, “let's just say around seventy-five is in the ballpark, eh Mom.”

“I won't tell.”

“Smart ass!” said Dad to Jake, in mockery.

“And where are you going to celebrate your birthday, Mr. Petersen?” asked Sandy after a pause.

“We're going out for a steak,” said Dad.

“To Puccini's Steak House. We're meeting Jenny there. Have you been?” asked Jake.

“No I haven't, actually.”

“I have all my teeth still so I can have a steak,” continued Dad, to more laughter.

“Oh you'll have your teeth for a long time still, and all your other charms,” said Jake.

“Sure I will.”

“Do you folks live in the area?”

“We live in the suburbs,” said Mom. “It's a great place with great people.”

“Well you have your whole life ahead of you.”

“That's right, a whole new life.”

Jake couldn't have scripted that. He looked at Sandy. She went a bit stiff. He wasn't through quite yet.

“I must say it's great to have such wonderful parents around to give me guidance, with all their years of experience and their vibrant wisdom.”

Mom and Dad smiled awkwardly.

“I'm sure it is,” said Sandy. “Well, listen, you guys have a great evening, and show your son a good time. I must get back to work.”

“Such a pleasure to meet you, Sandy.” Dad reached for her hand, shaking vigorously, and looked her in the eye. He always insisted on the importance of looking someone in the eye when you shook their hand.

“And see if you can get him to lose some weight, will you.” More laughter

“Thank you for coming to see us, love,” enjoined Mom, grasping Sandy's

outstretched palm with both hands.

“Take care, now,” she said, walking off. They stood quiet. And soon the sound of Sandy's door closing echoed back.

“Well, then, let's be off, guys, I'm sure you're hungry. See you tomorrow, Stephen.”

Stephen smiled wryly at Jake. “Of course. Mr. and Mrs. Petersen, glad to see you. And do come back again for your hundredth.”

Jake and Jenny were getting ready for bed. They'd just returned from dinner. It was late. Mom and Dad were sent home in a taxi. Josh accompanied them. He could then make his way back to the colony.

“Did you enjoy the evening, darling?”

“I did. Great dinner and good fun.”

“And Sarah was good.”

“She's always good. I find her very nice. You and Ed get along well.” Ed was Sarah's husband

“We always have. But Sarah's a bit cold to me often.”

Jake sat on the side of the bed in his underwear. Jenny was in the bathroom, washing up. A glass of whiskey and water sat on the vanity.

“That Josh is really a nice kid,” Jake resumed.

“Sure he is.”

“And handsome and smart. I wish he'd come around more.”

“I'm sure he has better things to do. Those young people have to spread themselves around.”

“Spread themselves around? They hole up in their colonies and leave the world behind.”

“Not all of them and not all the time. Many of them volunteer in the community.”

“Good. I still don't like it. Who cares who's left in the end?”

Jenny came out of the bathroom, drying her face with one hand, her drink in the other.

“What they're doing is not illegal.”

“And their so damn restrictive. What the age group in Josh's colony?”

“Between twenty-five and thirty, he said. It's one of the smaller ones.”

“Oh, a boutique? Yeah, must be nice. Volunteer in the community? Sure they spend most of their time having sex.”

“Well they don't have to worry about birth control.”

“How do they get these age restrictions past the human rights commission? Anyway, we should have a colony for the public service.”

Jenny put her nightgown on. “He knows you don't like it, Jake. He can tell by your questions and tone of voice.”

“I keep thinking about what that fucking lawyer was saying about regulations, about the need for regulations to determine the procedure to go through in every case.”

“They don't know that yet?”

“Hell no. Now it’s just fluffy 'announceables', as they say,” Jake made rabbit ears, a rarity.

“They won't even get in to implementation for a while, until they know they can manage the issue. I'm sure words like 'humanely', and 'quickly' and 'compassionately' will be foremost in Liz's talking points.”

Jenny sat down on the bed. Jake turned to her.

“You have to be careful what you say in public, though, darling. I'm still under oath and everything I do is confidential.”

“Sorry. You stopped me from blurting anything out,” she replied, somewhat annoyed.

“I'd lose my job if I said that. Not that I shouldn't. I should go to the press. I would if I had the courage of my convictions.”

“So you're not the type. You're a professional.”

“I don't have to leak anything. They'll hang themselves.”

“Mom and Dad said they enjoyed seeing you at work.”

“Yeah, I don't think little Sandy took too kindly to it though.”

“Leave Sandy alone. She's doing her job”

“Of course. We're all just doing our jobs.”

“Do you think you're going to change her or the system?”

“I just hope they announce it and it blows up. Then she might start giving some thought to it and to what she's asked to do.”

“I doubt it. She's young and ambitious and has to think about her future. I think young people are more obsessed with power now than any previous

generation.”

"Yeah. Power and sex. I would be too. And I don't care about her future."

"She does."

"Jenny, your parents are dead. Mine are still alive. You may not care about what's going on here, but I do and so might other people."

"Look Jake, don't get testy with me! Just because you have a tough assignment. If you don't like it go and speak to your boss."

Jake turned.

"Jenny, have you not heard a word of what I've been saying? It's not a question of speaking to my boss. This goes way beyond that."

"Then do what you think you need to do, Jake. We all have difficult choices."

"Jenny, why don't I just stop talking about it, then, since you obviously don't care."

"Fine Jake." Jenny drained her glass.

"And why do you keep drinking so much? Do you find it glamorous?"

"Hah. No. With you complaining about your work all the time, it's my only comfort."

She lifted the covers and reached for the lamp. "I'm going to bed now."

"Yeah. Good night. That's one more fucking day closer to our dignified option, I guess."

"I can hardly wait."

Jake was rather idle. The submission had been his main focus for several months and now there wasn't much to keep him busy. He didn't mind, and periods of reduced activity were not uncommon for analysts. Besides, Jake's reading tray was overflowing and it was nice to be able to dive into it at last. Not that it contained anything exciting, just some newly minted corporate policies and articles Stephen had sent him, and another scientific report.

Stephen's heavy footsteps could suddenly be heard. Jake knew Stephen was scheduled to meet with Sandy. The assistant deputy minister's office had been briefed the previous week and it went well, and the deputy minister the day before. Stephen had told Jake that Sandy wanted to meet and discuss.

"Hello, Jake."

Jake was leaning back with his feet on the desk, pretending not to have noticed Stephen's approach.

"Oh, hello Stephen."

"Why don't you come into my office for a few minutes?"

"Sure."

Jake was suddenly excited. The deputy minister had been briefed. Maybe it didn't go well. Maybe there were second thoughts higher up. Or maybe it was just that changes needed to be made. Jake hoped it wasn't the latter. He didn't want to deal it anymore.

Soon Jake was sitting attentively behind the small round table in the corner of Stephen's office, opposite his crowded desk. He slid into the chair with difficulty and had to move the table around a bit.

"So Jake, I just returned from a meeting attended by Sandy and a staffer

from the deputy minister's office.”

“Okay.”

Stephen glanced down at a sheet of paper covered in scribbles.

“So there's some interesting news,” he said with a blank expression.

“Unfortunately, it may mean a bit more work for us.”

“Really?” Jake exclaimed, plaintively.

“It seems the minister and the deputy have been talking.”

Great, Jake thought. Talking about how stupid the whole thing is, surely.

“Talking about what? Are they getting nervous? Do they want to pull it?”

“No, they want to modify it.”

“Modify it. Modify it how? I don't mind the extra work if it means modifying it in certain ways.”

“Well,” Stephen smiled, “I don't know if it's in certain ways.”

“Okay.”

“According to Sandy, who just debriefed me, the minister wants his briefing moved up.”

“Well, that's earth-shaking,” said Jake facetiously.

“But more importantly, he's extremely supportive of the initiative.”

“Extremely supportive? I guess that's not surprising. It was his idea.”

“There's more to it,” said Stephen, skimming the page of notes. “He actually wants to incorporate a piece on the youth colonies into the

submission.”

“The youth colonies? Why and how, Steve?” Jake felt his chest tighten.

“Basically, they want to combine the Dignified Option Initiative with a push to recognize and regulate the youth colonies, like, 'Yes we support optional and dignified withdrawal and we are also going to regularise and regulate the youth colonies'. I guess a policy on the colonies was in the works and they now see this as a good linkage. However, and I'm just looking at my notes from my meeting with Sandy, they want the message about the youth colonies to be upbeat. They don't want to impair or reduce the functioning of the colonies. In fact, they want to celebrate them as an important part of our future, what's left of it, while bringing them under some kind of broad governmental supervision. I guess a kind of quid pro quo sort of arrangement. In fact, some of the money saved in the health care system because of the Dignified Option Initiative might be re-profiled to a new program to assist colony infrastructure, but that hasn't been decided.”

Jake had been listening carefully with an increasing frown of disapproval.

“So, let me get this straight, combine two separate ill-advised and regressive policies into one integrated ill-advised and regressive policy package?”

“Well, that's about right I guess, so we may have to revise parts of the submission.” Stephen now leaned back, resigned.

“Stephen, this is ridiculous. Whose idea was this? Some sap in the MO? And what is the deputy doing...”

There was a sudden knock on Stephen's door. It opened and Sandy stepped in, holding the door.

“Hi guys. So I guess you're getting the scoop on the government's new direction, Jake?” Sandy sounded almost happy. She had been avoiding

Jake lately, it seemed.

“Well yes, but I would have some reservations,” retorted Jake.

“I know. So I just thought I'd pop by to tell you that I have booked a meeting with Liz for this afternoon and I'll send you both an invite. I think definitely the key messages and communications plan will need to be reviewed and revised. There's also going to have to be some changes to the actual submission, but I'm hoping they'll be minimal.”

“Well, we'll take a look and see how it can be done,” replied Stephen reassuringly.

“Fantastic, and I think I may have some more details on the youth colonies piece. I'm actually waiting for a further email from the minister's office.” Sandy turned her attention more to Jake. “Now it's not just the Dignified Options Initiative as such, but an integrated policy package covering a number of important bases.”

Jake looked at Stephen with an amused frown.

“So I understand. I wish they'd sorted this out much earlier.”

“I know Jake but we can't do anything about that. We're sort of at the mercy of the minister's office. Anyway, just wanted to pop by. Good job guys.”

Sandy smiled enthusiastically and flashed a ridiculous thumbs-up, before shutting the door behind her.

Neither men spoke for a few seconds. Stephen knew Jake was unimpressed.

“So, I know you're not going to like doing this.”

“What is *this*, Stephen? Is the government now going to endorse and support some kind of death cult? Because that's what those youth

colonies are. Or sex cult? You know what I mean.”

“I do. That’s always been part of the mix.”

“Or maybe it’s both. By now we all believe in two things, sex and death.”

“I actually didn't tell you,” Stephen lifted the sheet of notes again, “the one message that the MO has come up with and told Sandy about is 'The best for the last'.”

“The best for the last?” repeated Jake incredulously.

“Right, the idea being I guess that we have to leave the world in the best possible shape for the last people who will be here. But that means the colonies have to submit to regulation.”

“It sounds totally stupid and ridiculous, Stephen. How about something good for the rest of us?”

“Well, I don't disagree, and if it is really stupid maybe they'll realise it. Sometimes the minister's office gets carried away. They actually suggested this could be a model for other jurisdictions.”

“Other jurisdictions? Seriously? We’ll be like a world leader in sex-death cults?”

Stephen shrugged.

“Yeah well,” Jake sighed, “there may be a bright side if the whole thing blows up in their faces.”

“Speaking of a cult of death, Jake, the world is dying anyway.”

“Maybe it is. Maybe it won't in the end. But this is no way to deal with it.”

“Well, unfortunately we don't make the policy.”

“No, we just validate stupid policy decisions handed down by MO stooges.”

Pause.

“Do you go to church Jake?”

“What?”

“Oh I'm not trying to preach or anything. My wife and I go to church. You can't get a seat anymore. It's amazing.”

“There's no evidence lack of faith destroyed the human race. Anyway, I'm an atheist.”

“I know. It's just interesting. I wish we knew what it was.”

“We will. There's always another research study. We'll know at some point.”

“I'm not sure we will. It's been a long time.”

“But anyway,” continued Jake after an awkward pause, “they've made this whole initiative stupider than it was and hopefully, as I say, there is an even greater likelihood of it blowing up.”

“I don't know what to think anymore. My two kids are a bit older, and I fear for them. I really do. I do want what's best for them, but who knows what that is.”

“They're not in the colonies, are they?”

“No, they're a bit too old. Not their cup of tea either, it seems, which is probably a good thing.”

“I wish them well. You're lucky to have kids.”

“Not lucky. Old enough.”

* * * * *

That evening, Jake paced the living room, animated and getting slightly short of breath. Jenny sat on the couch, drink in hand, eyes glued to him, between sips.

“Those fucking pretentious wonk bastards in the MO.”

“Why are you taking it so hard?”

“I don't really care, but I don't want to work on this anymore. Maybe I'll speak to Stephen tomorrow. It's a massive weight on me, being the sole analyst on this file. Like I'm having issues of conscience now. Maybe they can assign another analyst to help me work on it.”

“Maybe they think you're the best man for the job?”

“I think they just want to make the changes quickly and move it along. Adding someone else to the team will just slow it down.”

“Jake, you're not responsible for this. You just do your job. You're not going to have to stand up in front of the public having to defend the government's actions.”

“I know. But I would never advise this policy. I would never, as a professional analyst, advise this course of action. And I really take exception having to put my name to the submission that does precisely that.”

Jake sat down next to Jenny.

“Maybe I'll have a drink. What are you having?”

“Rye and ginger.”

“Could you get me one?”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

Jenny got up laboriously. After a few minutes she returned with a low-ball.

“Maybe I shouldn't worry so much, and just do my job and enjoy what's left.”

“You might live longer. But that's not necessarily a good thing, either,” she said with a chuckle, sipping.

“Besides, the public opposition to this might be huge. I mean it's fairly high-risk.”

“There you go,” said Jenny reassuringly.

“But there's also this nagging rationale they have. It's almost logical, in a sinister kind of way. When we met with Sandy and Liz today, they talked about the government's desire to return society to nature in good order. Dignified withdrawal for the elderly, support for colony infrastructure with a view to this incremental 'footprint contraction', they call it. Sounds ridiculous. That will actually be a separate but complementary initiative. But it has its own sinister, ruthless logic.”

“Interesting,” said Sandy.

“Yeah. It's facilitating a return to nature of developed areas as they're depopulated. I guess it would need to be integrated with supporting the colonies because only the colonies will be left eventually. I don't know what they would do. Maybe demolish buildings and houses or something. Apparently other jurisdictions may be interested in policies like this. And we know that other jurisdictions are looking at reallocating resources away from health, but usually by just allowing treatment withdrawal for the terminally ill, not what we're proposing.”

“So they've accepted the inevitable, it seems. They want to plan for it. Some would call that responsible.”

“Oh, the words 'long-term' and 'strategic' and 'prudent' were certainly on Liz's lips today.” He took a long quaff from the lowball.

“So that's it.”

“Perhaps, but I just wish I wasn't the only analyst on the file, Jenny.”

“It's understandable.”

After a few minutes, Jake got up.

“I'll be in the office.”

Jake went to the small bedroom that had been converted into an office. The other spare bedroom, adjacent, was a library. Quite a nice setup but only because there were no children as it turned out. The study was well equipped with a computer work station and separate writing desk and antique round tripod table in the middle. Jake tried to keep it tidy, but Jenny was not as good at organising her papers and files. He lowered himself into the padded chair, called up the word processor and started typing.

I hereby resign from the public service, effective immediately.

He continued with an explanation, somewhat rambling he knew but just a draft.

He objected to the Dignified Option Initiative. He thought it was unconstitutional, and more importantly, immoral. He did not agree that the legal research had been done to an adequate degree. He did not think such a policy could be justified on the basis of financial savings, nor even on the basis of the current population crisis. He thought vulnerable citizens were being placed in mortal risk, and that many would be

increasingly pressured or even subject to coercion to undertake the procedure. He thought respect for life and for society's elderly citizens outweighed any other policy or fiscal consideration, and was the highest test of the civility and morality of a society in conditions of societal stress.

Should he include a bit about supporting regressive and self-ghettoising colonies for the youngest? No, let's keep it on point. That was a side issue, a distraction from the main objection.

Jake sat and stared at the screen, and drained his low-ball. He continued to edit the letter, and thought about what he might do after he left government, and what Jenny might think. Surely he should discuss his decision with her first. He wasn't sure. But it was a good letter.

* * * * *

Jenny never noticed Jake coming to bed, and she couldn't be sure because the bed was never actually made. She assumed he had already showered and was downstairs having his coffee. Jake was an early riser.

But when Jenny went downstairs there was no sign of Jake. The coffee had not even been made. She began to worry. He'd retired to the study the previous night, so she went back upstairs and checked. It was empty, but the computer was still on, which was unusual because Jake always shut down when he finished a session, to save electricity, he would insist. Jenny never quite understood, since the world would need less electricity over time, not more. But Jake was like that.

She pushed the mouse to get rid of the screen saver and log off, and saw the resignation letter. She read it carefully, and became clammy and short of breath. He can't be serious, she thought. Is it really that important? It's not his responsibility.

Jenny grabbed the telephone and called Jake at work. He must have taken off with his silly letter. She got his voice message. It was three days old. It usually was.

“Jake, hello my love. Look. I just found your resignation letter. Please don’t submit it. I know you’re upset. You have to talk to me first. That’s only fair. I know it’s been tough for you. And I know I haven’t always been understanding. I’m sorry. There’s no way I can know what you have to go through every day. I’m truly sorry if I haven’t been there for you the way I should have been. But you have to talk to me. We’ll talk this out. Please call me, Darling. Please call me. I love you very much. Very, very much. We only have each other. We need each other. I love you very much. Please don’t do anything. Please call me. Love you.”

Jenny put the phone down, and wiped a tear from her cheek. She read the letter again. The idealistic bastard. But that’s why I love him. She went downstairs and filled the hopper with coffee beans, then turned the machine on. She stood there staring at it. Maybe I should drive downtown and meet him, she thought. Be there for him.

The phone rang. She ran to pick it up. He must have got my message, she thought. That’s good. But the call display did not say “Government”.

“Jake?” she said regardless. He could be anywhere.

“Hi Jenny, it’s Josh.”

“Oh hi, Josh. I’m sorry. I thought you might be Jake.”

“That’s okay. Look I just wanted to thank you guys for the dinner and for arranging that for grandpa.”

This was a bit odd. Josh rarely called, and never at this hour.

“That’s fine, Josh. It was our pleasure. Jake was really happy to see you. We were so glad you could make it.”

“I really enjoyed it.”

“You have a great day, Josh”.

“So Jenny, I know Jake doesn’t like me being in a colony.” Sandy was surprised by this. Jake must really have affected the boy.

“Josh, that’s no problem. Jake has his opinions but you know, he’s a stuffy civil servant. You have to do what’s right for you and we’ll support you in that all the way.”

“I know, Jenny. But I guess I’ll reconsider now.”

“That’s not necessary, Josh. You just do what you have to do and what you think is right.”

“I know, thanks. But is Jake around right now?”

“Actually no. He’s gone to work a bit early. Have you spoken to your parents about your decision, Josh?”

“Not really, I guess it’s just...”

“Josh, Jake can be a bit opinionated. You speak to your parents and discuss it with them. We’ll support you all the way. You’re an inspiring young man and we have to make sure that you can contribute in the best way you can.”

“Thanks Jenny.”

“And I’ll have Jake call you as soon as he gets home, okay. Or you can phone him at work. Do you have his number?”

“No, that’s okay. So thanks...”

“Of course, Josh. You have a great day. I have to get ready for work, but we’ll talk to you soon, okay.”

“Okay thanks, bye then.”

Perplexing, Jenny thought, but Jake was a great guy and Josh always looked up to him. He could do great things in government, if he just learnt how to play the game.

The newspaper wasn't on the counter. Jake was probably the only one on the street who still had a newspaper subscription. He must have left in a hurry. She should have comforted him last night, she thought, as she opened the front door.

And there was Jake on the patio stairs, leaning against the rail and staring into the street, in the same clothes from yesterday.

"Jake, what the fuck are you doing here?"

He was motionless.

"Enjoying this beautiful Spring morning, darling."

"I saw your resignation letter. I called you at work. What are you doing. Why are you sitting here? You're not going to resign, are you?"

"I fell asleep. That armchair's too comfortable. It's a good letter."

"Did you send it?"

"No, Jenny."

"Were you going to go in like that, in the same clothes you wore yesterday?"

"Is the coffee ready? I heard the grinder."

"Will you come inside please, and have a shower, and talk to me?"

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what, my love?"

“There’s some commotion on the main drag, it seems.”

“Are you hungover, Jake? How much did you drink? Can you come inside? Don’t despair like this. You can’t despair and give up. Nothing is your fault.”

“Look at the sky.”

“Whatever. If you’re just going to be ridiculous, I’m going in.”

Jake held up the newspaper that had been crunched in his lap. The headline covered the entire visible half of the newspaper, in big, bold capitals.

CONCEPTION!

“Oh my god, sweetie!”

Jenny took the paper from Jake’s outstretched arm and sat down beside him.

“I don’t know, darling,” Jake just stared out to the street, intense, “there hasn’t been a pregnancy anywhere in the world in the last, what, twenty or so years, in North America at least. Babies just dwindled away until there weren’t any more of them.”

“I know, Jake, but this is fantastic. Stop being an analyst.” Jenny scanned the paper purposefully, opening it.

“I thought, before I even read it, this could be a freak occurrence, or induced in some laboratory somewhere. It might not turn out to be viable. And could it be replicated? And where did it happen? And was it genuine or a hoax. There have been pregnancy hoaxes but not in the last decade I don’t think. They made it a criminal offence.”

“Jake?” Jenny kept reading.

“What about the poor mother, Jenny, - talk about expectations. Will it be a normal birth, a normal child, or something sickly and malformed or itself sterile?”

“Jake, the mother.”

“Yes Jenny.”

“Is a member of Josh’s youth colony.”

“Yup.”

“Jake must know the girl.”

“Yes, and she wants to go back there after she’s finished being examined. And I’ll happily write a submission forcing her to stay in hospital.”

“And what about your other submission, Jake?” She sounded excited.

“Will they kill it now?”

“I don’t know. I know what was planned. Maybe I’ll be one of the few who’ll ever know. But maybe not, Jenny. Depends on what happens. This might not be a viable pregnancy. We’ll find out.”

“The medical team thinks it’s a good pregnancy, Jake. But how? After all these years? And in a youth colony.”

“Maybe it’s the food.”

“Jake?”

“Yes darling?”

“Josh could be the father,” she said with calm deliberation.

Jake turned to her, “I suppose that’s possible, Jenny,” he smirked, “or one

of them.”

“He phoned here this morning, Jake.”

“Is that who you were speaking to? What did he say?”

“He told me he was reconsidering the youth colony.”

“Hah! He wants to get out with his child, maybe.”

Jake looked out. “Can you hear it now?”

There seemed to be a rising commotion, like a festive gathering crowd, down the road on the main street.

“My God, Jenny. What if it really is his kid? Why would he phone?”

“Maybe he’s just happy and hoping for a new beginning, like many people will be. Maybe a more normal life for himself.”

“Well I hope it’s his, darling. Would love to see the look on Sandy’s face.”

“Jake, if it is Josh’s child, it’s almost ours too, in a way.”

“Jenny, it will belong to humanity. If it lives.”

They sat together in silence for a while. Then Jenny rubbed Jake's back.

“Why don’t you go down the road and see what’s going on?”

“No. I’ll have that coffee and enjoy the morning. Actually, let’s have a drink. Cancel the coffee.”

“Love you.”

She placed her head on Jake’s shoulder.

“And Jenny?”

“Yes, Jake.”

“I think I should paint this patio.”

Finis