

DRAINING THE SWAMP



Ed Gibney

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ISBN: 978-1-492-94009-8

Third Edition: October 2013

Second Edition: October 2012

First Edition: July 2012

Printed and bound by CreateSpace, wwwcreatespace.com

www.evphil.com

www.facebook.com/EvolutionaryPhilosophy

*For all the patriots I know
who really are trying to make a difference.*

Chapter 1

Our Hero

Every day, approximately five hundred thousand children are born. To date, over one hundred billion people have lived on this earth. So far, not one of them has determined the best form of government. Those odds, however, do not daunt presumptive heroes. Intrepid souls have invested their lives in this task for millennia. From Plato and the philosopher kings of his Republic, to Aristotle's constitutional analysis in Politics. From St. Augustine's City of Gods, which tried to lift citizens' eyes to an afterlife beyond this world, to Machiavelli's Prince, who looked at the world of men as it is. From Hobbes' Leviathan casting a menacing shadow of peace across its countryside, to Locke's Treatises on Government extending that guardianship to cover life, liberty, and property. Adam Smith's invisible hand provided the Wealth of Nations, and Karl Marx issued his call to redistribute Das Capital. These and many other philosophers have done their best from their ivory towers and the realities of their times. They have led us all on a wending and winding road toward the very heart of what government should be, and they have brought us to a place where we can follow along into the bowels of the institution on a quest for the final answer.

Dan Comner was settled in for his two-hour flight from Minneapolis to Washington. It had been a dull gray morning in Minnesota, but now that the plane was above the clouds, it was clear and bright outside. The sun shone through the window on his right, making his square ster-

ling silver cuff links stand out even against the brilliant crispness of the white shirtsleeves they were holding together. Dan knew this was flattering lighting. It accented the silver hair he had grown to love over the years for the authority it seemed to lend him. The overhead light blinked off with a bong to indicate that the plane was leveling off after its initial ascent and Dan enjoyed the return to personal freedom that this entailed. He pushed his plush, leather, aisle seat back a few inches and spread out the pages of the Wall Street Journal he had picked up that morning from the airport vending machine. A subscription copy would be sitting on his desk when he returned, but he always bought another one for these early morning flights. There was no sense waiting to read day-old business news when keeping an hour ahead of your rivals at all times was all that mattered.

A plump and aging stewardess barreled past Dan's seat on her way to offer limited choice to the masses in the back of the plane. She was quickly replaced by the vision of a lithe brunette though leaning in to take the drink orders of first class.

"A tonic and lime for me, thanks," Dan enunciated in his best baritone.

"Of course, Mr. Comner," the flight attendant demurely replied.

"And I'll have a Diet Coke, please," piped up the pretty young blond to Dan's right.

"I'm sorry, we only carry Pepsi products on this flight, ma'am. Is a Diet Pepsi ok then?" the attendant replied in her overly apologetic tone.

"No, in that case, I'll have a cranberry and Sierra Mist please. Thank you."

The flight attendant moved off to gather the rest of the orders from the extra-wide seats. Dan got back to his paper. A quick scan of the headlines was all he ever needed at this point in his life. Unless there was something relevant to his line of work, there wasn't much use spending his time poring over the details about two former rivals merging or Congress bickering over the latest budget. Dan was glad nothing of importance was in today's edition—the ammonia smell pushing its way out of the pressed newsprint with each turn of the page was starting to overwhelm the preferable odor of vanilla and lilies that was wafting over from his seatmate. Dan finished his scan of the paper and folded it away into his seat pocket just as the flight attendant returned with the drinks.

Choosing age before competing beauty, the flight attendant had no doubt as to whom she was serving first. Drink in hand, Dan leaned back as his seatmate reached across to accept her premixed drink. As she did, Dan took a moment to look her over a little more closely. The slightly faded jeans adhered to the uniform of youth. The zip-off boots on the outside of them accentuated the length of her slim calves, while also hinting at the practicality of a traveler who knows to wear bulky items rather than pack them—especially those easily removed for security. Her maroon wraparound sweater over a black turtleneck was a sensible layering that unfortunately hid what looked to be a dynamite figure. Just through her arms, Dan managed to glimpse a copy of *The Fountainhead* in her seat pocket. As she pulled her arms back toward her, his gaze slid along their length before getting stuck on the large diamond engagement and wedding rings on her left hand. Dan cocked an eyebrow and lightly nodded his head up and down as

he wondered what powerful man had laid claim to this stunner. Lost in this reverie, Dan got caught looking just a little too long and his eyes met briefly with the young woman's before he turned back towards the screen in front of him, which was now displaying a map of the Midwest with an airplane silhouette over Lake Michigan.

With the ice broken by the fleeting contact, the young woman turned her head and eagerly initiated conversation. "Are you going to DC or continuing on?"

"Washington," Dan replied casually. "You?"

"Yep, me too," she replied brightly, nodding her head as she went for a sip of her drink.

"Where's your husband?" Dan inserted expertly in the pause. She cocked her head a little with her mouth still full of juice and soda and gave Dan a slightly questioning look. "I only ask because I couldn't help noticing that beautiful ring you have there. It caught my eye as you got your drink. I hope you don't mind that I was staring at it."

"Ah," she said, letting his explanation settle in. "He's actually driving our things to DC."

"So, you're moving from Minnesota?"

"Yes. It's a bit scary. I grew up in St. Paul and went to college nearby."

Dan leaned in with his best avuncular smile. "First time from home?"

"Um, not exactly," she pulled back slightly, but continued on. "I went to grad school in Pittsburgh, but it was a lot different going off to school. There isn't any four-year plan in front of me now. Are you from Minnesota?"

"Yes, yes. From a long line of Comners, actually. My great-grandfather built the first commercial grain ware-

house in the state. We've been running agriculture companies ever since."

"Oh, so you're a businessman. What do you do?"

"I'm the CEO of Cargyle." Dan just let the statement hang in the air impressively. Continuing on to explain how it was the largest privately owned firm in the country always sounded like unnecessary bragging, like he was trying too hard.

"Wow. That's a pretty big deal." She folded her left leg up under her and shifted in her seat to face him a little more squarely. "Do you mind if I ask how you've risen to that position? I find success stories fascinating."

"I'll give you the cocktail party version," said Dan. "It's the one I've practiced the most and I can stay awake during it. In a nutshell, Cargyle bought my family's business. I held out and negotiated a sweet deal for myself that ensured I would end up in the C-suite. After that, it was just a matter of time until I rose to the top spot." He paused to take a sip of his drink.

"So, what, all-American farm boy sells off a position he inherited, lays off tons of people his grandfather hired, and now uses the money to fly to DC in first class so he can parade his sharp suits in front of servile politicians? Did I get that right?"

Dan glanced down at himself. "You noticed the sharp suit, eh? Well that's good." He took another sip of his drink. "You're not a journalist are you?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Well then, I wouldn't put it that way, but I suppose it's not far off." Dan twisted in his seat now to face his adversary a little more head on. "And what about you? Clear-eyed young blond with a tongue sharpened beyond

her years reading Ayn Rand in first class? Are you sure you aren't on your way to a Fox News convention?"

"So you've read *The Fountainhead*?" she asked.

"Twice," he replied. "And passages from *Atlas Shrugged* several times. You probably haven't gotten to that one yet or you wouldn't have asked me that about selling my company."

The young woman leaned back against the window. "No? What would I have asked, then?"

Dan leaned in, pressing his advantage. "In that case, you would have wondered what a titan of industry such as myself was doing going to the den of iniquity to deal with the carpetbaggers, panhandlers, and thieves known as politicians."

She replied without skipping a beat. "Let's say I had read that, and did ask that. Since you've got this all mapped out, what do you say then?"

Dan did a slight double take, but the intriguing woman never flinched. He smoothly shifted gears to a light-hearted manner and sat back in his seat. "Well then, we'd be getting along very well and I'd tell you how I am on my way to a donor party. One has to make one's appearances. It may be unfortunate, and I may not respect them, but politicians do still occupy a powerful place in this country and Cargyle needs to get a fresh exemption to keep our corporate taxes as low as they are. We're a very important creator of jobs. We need all the support we can ever get."

"Shouldn't that be the other way around?" she interrupted. "That you get all the support you can ever need?"

"Touché again," Dan chuckled. "And yes, equally true. Although, it takes hard work to get that support—to remind those politicians who's actually in charge."

“Isn’t that what voting is for?”

Dan looked over at her. “That’s the first naïve thing you’ve said to me. Hell, I would never vote. It doesn’t matter who’s in office. I just want the government off my back and out of my pocket so I can make as much money as I can. Read the book after that one,” he said pointing to her seatback pouch. “You’ll see.”

“So you don’t think you’ve benefitted from the taxes I’ve paid?” It was her turn to lean in now. “Cargyle is one of the largest food exporters in the world isn’t it? When you buy up Argentinean land and export their beef to the US for a big chunk of your corporate profits, how do you think your bargaining would go without the implicit threat of support from our armed forces that you bring to the table?”

“I’m all for national defense, but...”

“How about all of those low-wage workers you hire for your factories. Do you think they come out of the womb prepared to support your operations? What do you think it would cost you in basic education if you had to train everyone you hired how to read and write?”

“Going to school is just...”

“And you. Do you think your family’s money would have been handed down to you intact without the rule of law to protect them from thieves and swindlers? Do you really think they would have survived all those years out on the plains without the government enforcing their property rights and guaranteeing their contracts were upheld?”

“Ok, ok. Uncle,” Dan smiled a little too warmly. “I know when I’m beaten by the passion and conviction of youth.” He shook his head in a subconscious attempt to

cast out the thoughts that were trying to re-order the beliefs in his mind. "Listen. I've got to ask. Who are you?"

The young woman stuck out her hand. "Justine Swensen. I work for the new senator Jim Jefferson. I helped out on his campaign. We'll have to look out for that exemption of yours and do what we can to stop it from being renewed."

This time, Dan flushed at the unexpected response. It wasn't obvious on his ski-slope-tanned face, but he felt it himself nonetheless. "Perhaps you should have told me that earlier," he almost scolded.

"What," she replied, turning her attention back to her drink, "and spoil all the fun you were having trying to impress me?"

Chapter 2

Personal Staffer

And so our heroine Justine continued on her journey to the nation's capital. While New York surrounds you with sheer concrete mass and energy, San Francisco sits perched like a delicate work of art on a glorious landscape, Boston drips with provincial charm, and Chicago's skyline towers impressively over the prairie flatlands, Washington is by far the grandest city in the country. Flying into Ronald Reagan National Airport, Justine marveled out her window at the inspiring scene below. To her wide eyes, the tall, impossibly slender, gleaming white Washington Monument looked like a giant tent pole in the center of the city preparing to hold up the great green expanse of the Mall for a circus of celebrity politicians. To older knowing eyes, however, its concentrated weight might have resembled a pinpoint in a gravitational field, distorting light and pulling other bodies of buildings towards it; its two-toned blockwork hinting at a history of struggles and violent collisions over the years as federal satellites circled in trying to get closer and closer to the epicenter. Only the bulbous glory of the Capitol building perched high on its Hill appeared to keep this whole thing from collapsing in on itself. Like a second foci, it acts as another attraction point—weighty enough to draw its own orbiters, but not quite large enough to suck in the other center. One monument dedicated to individual glory; one dome signifying the power of the people. Both symbols drawing patriots eager to be subsumed in these eternal goals. Both built on a for-

mer swamp, which used to bring death and decay to all things that flowed there.

After a quick metro ride from the airport, Justine strolled through Union Station on her way to one of the three Senate satellites orbiting to the north of the Capitol building. As she passed through the station, she almost lost her balance while tipping her head back to take in the enormous carved vaulted ceiling soaring over an area equal to several football fields. She gaped at everything: the statues in the corners of forgotten patriots and Greek concepts of virtue; the red, white, and blue bunting draped over windows and cornices; and the spotless, smooth, hard, marble floors that echoed with the babbling brook of tourists flowing through with their roller bags. The local commuters in their dark wool power-suits—always there no matter the day, hour, season, or temperature—made even the most confident newcomer look down at her comfortable traveling clothes and realize she was not in Minnesota anymore.

Justine was headed to the Russell building. As the oldest and most historical of the Senate offices, it was a sought after location for new Senators—but only because they didn't yet know how oddly shaped and drafty the rooms inside would be. The gray limestone beaux-arts facade was classically understated compared to preconceptions of where Senators must work. Measured against the marvelous stonework on the Capitol building across the street, or the Supreme Court just a bit catty-corner to the south, the smooth exterior of the Russell building belied the intricacy and roughness held within.

Not a part of her normal commute, the flight and train station were still new to Justine. Getting past her building's

security checkpoints though was already becoming background noise to our heroine just six months into her frantic new job. The x-ray machines and metal detectors, manned by U.S. Capitol Police and stuffed into tiled entryways with ornate ceiling friezes, no longer seemed so jarring and out of place, although the original designers with their delicate sense of proportion had clearly never conceived of a need for housing modern security apparatus in these confined spaces. Usually, Justine passed through these hurdles while obliviously continuing a morning walking coffee meeting with a colleague. But today, arriving late and noticing the carelessness of another conversation, she had a chance to wonder what those guards must hear while protecting the halls of power for people who barely paid them any attention. It was probably a good idea that they passed rigorous background checks. And had excellent pensions. She supposed that perhaps Congress did listen to them after all and responded where it mattered most.

It had been a tough few months for Justine. This was her first solitary stroll into the building in weeks and she took advantage of it to pause and take a deep breath while hoping that the whirlwind of living in DC after the frenzied campaign and victory would start to calm down now that her husband Mike was on his way to join her. He'd been so supportive of the passion she'd had reignited by a simple speech she saw at a state fair. Mike had taken her there to get her out of the house after she'd been floundering for a few months with the news of her miscarriage and resulting inability to have children. He had hoped she could pick up a hobby at the fair to go along with her job, but when she heard senatorial candidate Jim Jefferson talk about changing the culture in the halls of Washington, all

the late night talks she had after her political science classes in college came flooding back to her. She left the fair that day knowing exactly how she wanted to merge the practical IT skills she had picked up in grad school with the idealistic dreams of her undergrad years.

Now it was a year later and she was in those Washington halls, walking through the long and sterile corridors passing one same-sized brown door after another. One might open into an office of junior staffers busily typing away in their cramped cubicle farm. Another identical door might usher you instead into a grand office lobby where purple velvet curtains framed the windows, mahogany desks from the 1800's hosted tart young receptionists, and glimpses were available of the senator's private office (or the receptionist's lacy camisole). One never knew what was behind these doors. It was the kind of unsigned locale typical of DC—easily navigated by those who had been there for years, but bewildering and unknowable for unaccompanied outsiders. Justine wondered what it really meant to “change these halls” and if a physical change wouldn't be the best place to start.

Our heroine's office was something in between the two extremes. It was a rather large room next to the main entrance lobby for her senator. She could use one of her own brown hallway doors to enter directly into the office when she was alone, or she could pass through the grander entrance lobby if she wanted to impress a visitor. She shared the space with six other staff members, each having their own solid, if bulky, 1950's wooden desk. The high ceilings and drab walls were adorned only with framed, smiling, picture portraits of the president, vice president, and senator. This made the office feel even colder than it was in the

winter, and, paradoxically, downright freezing in the summer when the building staff would set the thermostats to 62 degrees.

As she strolled in to this drab setting, one of her office mates turned to say hi and cheered things up considerably. “Welcome back, Justine! How was the trip home? Finish your book assignment, yet?”

Trevor Tremen was another presumptive hero spending his time on earth toiling in the salt mines of government. While Justine often felt lost trying to navigate this foreign environment for the first time, Trevor could hardly have been more at home. The son of a state congressman back in Richmond, Virginia, Trevor had grown up around politics. Although his father preferred the lifestyle of small town Virginia to the racial tensions and high crime rates of DC in the latter half of the 20th century, he regularly made the 100-mile trip to visit the big leagues. Because the Tremen family had a long and powerful hold on Virginia from the time of their tobacco plantations, Trevor’s father played a key fundraising role for the Republicans in what was often a hotly contested swing state.

Under the influence of a girlfriend or two, Trevor, however, had rebelliously grown up to be a Democrat to the great consternation of his family. But coming from the background he did, he was therefore one of the most valuable kind—one who knew the opposition and could either predict their plans or make a few phone calls to elicit an alliance when needed. A graduate of UVA, he also fit right in on the Hill as a preppy, ex-frat guy. Better yet, as one with a classic row house just a few blocks east of the Capitol building purchased by his father—the location being vital as it was within both wheelbarrow distance from liq-

uor stores selling kegs, and stumbling distance from the old bars on Pennsylvania Avenue where the best networking happened. Trevor liked to knock back a few beers, but mostly he loved getting together and talking shop with all the other staffers on the Hill who secretly felt like they ran this town and weren't afraid to say so amongst their peers over a plastic cup of Yuengling.

Trevor had been on the Hill now for about five years. Through his father's connections, he'd started on the Hill as a legislative correspondent with a local congressman. This basically meant he had to read thousands of pieces of constituent mail, physical or electronic, and make sure the interns had sorted them into proper issue categories so Trevor and the other LCs could respond with a carefully canned message that had been run up and down the flagpole through the legislative director, chief of staff, and the congressman to make sure it was in sync with the office's position. To most people, it would have been tedious work. To most people, most of the incoming mail would have been sorted into the "nutz" pile and gone unanswered. But Trevor saw it as a kind of communion with the people. It was like listening all day to the back and forth at one of his parties.

When Senator Jim Jefferson came to DC and posted vacancy notices for his office, Trevor was exactly the kind of person he sought to sprinkle in to his staff to provide a balance of insider knowledge against the fresh perspectives coming in with the new election team. Trevor jumped at the chance to oversee the education and defense issues for the new Senator as this was more aligned with his interests and the heavier load was a prestigious step up for him as well. Justine was in charge of the medical and technology

issues—not typically very busy, but challenging enough to a political newbie that she relied heavily on Trevor for help in the early going.

“It was a great trip, thanks,” Justine replied as she set her things down at her desk. “And I finished reading the book, but haven’t had a chance to collect my thoughts on it yet.”

“Well we need those opposition research points by the end of the day. The Republicans have been hammering us in the press with their thinly veiled messages about Randian individualism. Anything you can throw in the mix will be helpful.” Trevor turned back in his seat to face his computer screen, but called out over his shoulder as he remembered something. “By the way, how was your upgrade on the return trip?”

“Pretty sweet, I have to tell you. That was a nice thing for the senator to donate his miles to me. I have to remember to gift-wrap the curds I brought him as a thank you.” Justine’s smile at these pleasant thoughts of midwestern dairy products was quickly erased though by the memo she saw in her in-basket. As she scanned through another constituent response she had written that had come back from the chain of command with red ink all over it, she muttered under her breath in frustration.

Trevor had seen this coming and spun around to offer a hand. “What’s up? Crafting another constituent reply?”

“Yeah, though apparently not very well. What do you think about this? I got a letter from some woman complaining about her emergency room costs. She apparently stepped on a bee while walking through a public garden. She wrote that she had her shoes off because she wasn’t

supposed to be in there after hours and thought she'd make less noise tiptoeing across the gravel paths."

"Nothing like admitting a little trespassing in a letter to your public official," smirked Trevor.

"I know, right. At least this one didn't involve a felony, like that one..."

"...from the drug dealer asking for better protection from the Mexicans who were stealing his jobs! We should have kept that one and framed it." Trevor laughed at the story that had been going around the office for a few days now.

"Anyway," Justine said, finding it hard to laugh too much in the face of her struggles, "it turns out she's allergic to bees and her foot starts swelling up so she can't even put her shoes back on to get back to her car." Justine began to hurry the pace of the story to get to her problem. "Her boyfriend ends up carrying her to the hospital, where she gets a quick shot in the emergency room before being sent home. A few weeks later, the bill arrives and it's \$900. For five minutes of work and one tiny shot!" she finished with a flourish of mock shock.

"Yep. That sounds about right," grinned Trevor.

"And of course this woman has no insurance. So she writes to us to ask what we can do about it, and why it costs so much, and why can't we learn a few things from the private sector and give out treatment like her grandma gets with Medicare."

"No!"

"Uh huh," nodded Justine. "So, I crafted this response where I explain to her first of all that Medicare is run by the government, so thank you very much for that compliment. Secondly, the concept of insurance was invented

precisely to pool resources together in order to cover unexpected emergencies for individuals, so if she's not going to contribute to that pool of money she can't expect to have others cover her when she needs it."

Trevor's eyes widened and his eyebrows lifted just a bit.

"And finally," Justine continued, "I closed by telling her she really ought to think about not wandering around gardens after hours in her bare feet if she's allergic to bees. Of course, I said this all very diplomatically and as nicely as I possibly could, but, well, you can see all the red marks on here." Justine held up the returned memo, which did in fact look like the failed spelling test of a fourth grader who was still unable to read.

Trevor didn't even look at it. "You can't say those things!" He laughed and shook his head. Justine's eyebrows crinkled together as she looked just the slightest bit hurt.

"I mean, you'd be right of course, and that's just what we would say to each other around here," Trevor smoothly caught himself before offending Justine further, "but we just don't talk to constituents like they were adults or people we were discussing issues with at a party."

"They are adults aren't they? So why not?"

"Because we just don't." Trevor paused before continuing. "I guess if I think about it, it's because we start to sound like we're talking down to them. Voters didn't elect us to be their professors who research issues and teach them about them. Most voters had pretty bad experiences with teachers in high school—that's why the majority of them never attended college."

“But why can’t that be our role?” Justine felt the hot flush in her cheeks that was betraying her emotional response, but she knew that wouldn’t deter Trevor from engaging in another office debate. “Thomas Jefferson said we needed an educated citizenry for a healthy democracy. Don’t you think a senator named Jim Jefferson should help carry out that legacy?”

“Yes, but that’s what legislation is for. We can’t educate the public through pedantic speeches that piss people off.” Trevor paused, realizing he might not be heeding his own advice, then continued on but without rising to Justine’s confrontational tone. “Look, you’re absolutely correct in principle, but the name of the game in this office is making sure people vote for us next time around. In these letters, we just can’t come across as elite know-it-alls. We can’t afford to have our constituents think of us that way. We need them to like us. Right?” Trevor paused, allowing Justine’s agreement with this bromide to settle in and bring some calm. “If they like us, they’ll continue to vote for us. They’ll probably even tell their friends to vote for us. The best thing we can do to make them like us is to just make them feel like we are actually listening to them.”

“That sounds like something my mother the child psychologist would say,” Justine replied.

“Really? So then this will be easy for you. In order to make them feel heard, all you need to do is echo back the same things they are saying to you.”

“Even if they are saying illegal things?” Justine added wryly.

“Ok, maybe not those parts of the letters. But for example, in your response I might say something like...Dear Mrs. so-and-so. Thank you very much for your insightful

letter. Unaffordable health care is an urgent issue for my office and I am glad you share this concern with me.” He paused for just a second while looking up at the curved plaster ceiling with flakes ready to fall off it. “I am pleased to report to you that we have staff looking this very moment at Medicaid and how we might be able to extend the benefits from this cherished program to more of our citizens. This will be a long and difficult fight, but it is a just cause. In addition to your valuable story that aids our research, I hope that I can count on receiving your vote in the next election too so we can continue to fight for this cause for you. Sincerely, Senator Jim Jefferson.”

“Wow. Amazing.” Justine was actually impressed with the non-speech speech.

“Thank you.” Trevor gave a mock bow from his seat. “Keep it generic like that to reuse as a standard template for all your medical cost complaint letters. That’s key. Anyway, try something like that. Okay?”

Trevor began to turn around, pleased with the points he had made. But the warm smile and head nodding that he expected to see from Justine were instead replaced by a pursed mouth and far-off look.

“Okay. It’s just...I thought we’d be *doing* more here. You know what I mean?” Justine brought her eyes back from the distance to look up at Trevor with an unmistakable sense of disappointment in them.

Ah yes, this conversation, thought Trevor. He’d had it many times over the last few years with similar staffers new to the Hill. He never felt that his role in the dance of democracy wasn’t important, but plenty of ambitious young idealists always wanted to do more.

“I don’t want to sound ungrateful or like I’m diminishing what we do here,” continued Justine, “but I think I’d rather be one of those staff members who was actually researching the issues instead of just reporting back to the public that someone else was working on it.”

“Sure, sure.” This part flowed smoothly from repetition for Trevor. “But that’s our job on the front lines of politics. As a personal staffer, and particularly one for a new senator who hasn’t built up the seniority to get involved in the big fights yet, interacting with the voters is what we do. To me, politics is about people, so there isn’t any other place that I’d rather be.

“But right there,” Justine interrupted his well-rehearsed lines. “You say politics is about people, but I don’t think it is for me. People come and go through this world. If it were up to most of them, they wouldn’t even think about politics. They don’t give any real thought to its purpose and they just want the rules to favor them so they can get as big a handout as possible from the government. To me, politics should be a place for leadership of the people—leadership through ideas, through the careful understanding of the issues. Without that, nothing will ever change.”

Trevor shook his head. “I guess I just disagree. After watching my father and his friends exhibit ‘leadership’ from their plantation homes and their plush offices while being driven between the two in the back seat of a government-issued sedan, I came to distrust that style of governing. It’s very easy to lose touch with reality if that’s your definition of politics. No, for me, I want that interaction with the voters. I want to engage them and make them feel like they are involved in our democracy. If you want to be

working on the issues, then you need to get on a committee. Become a professional staffer. That's where you can really hone in on an issue and try to do something about it. There are some drawbacks of course..."

Trevor continued with his take on why someone else's job wasn't for him, but our heroine had heard all she needed to. Issues. Doing something about them. She enjoyed working for a senator she admired, but she knew she had to be true to her own hopes and dreams. The hunt was on for the perfect job, and one as a professional staffer sounded like the next logical place to look.

Chapter 3

Professional Staffer

It took another eighteen months before Justine could move on. She had to wait for the turnover in Congress to open up some slots and she had to put in her time on the bottom rung gaining experience. But once she had, it didn't take long for Justine to secure the position she wanted. With her education and history of accomplishment, she always breezed through pre-screening processes based on resume key words. She sounded like a dream candidate on paper with the hard skills printed there. Her degrees from Carlton and Carnegie Mellon were ample evidence of an intellectually rigorous background. The Masters in Information Systems was technical and useful, while the double major undergrad of History and Psychology displayed a curiosity of both context and human nature. The big fear from a resume like this was that its owner might simply be a slightly autistic overachiever. Selective employers in her background such as the Mayo Clinic and a United States Senator did little to dispel this possibility. But when our cute blonde with the enthusiastic, calm, confident personality of someone raised in a loving and optimistic home came through the door, interviewers were completely bowled over. Smart bosses knew she would be an asset to the team. Insecure bosses weren't threatened by her midwestern naïveté. Women wanted to be friends with her. Men thought of her as the perfect daughter, or the perfect date. In short, it wouldn't come as

a surprise to see her get any and every job she could possibly want in a tale about her life.

The one she wanted now though was as a staffer on the House Appropriations Committee, specifically its Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, otherwise known as ‘Labor H’ in the Hill lingo. Outside of the Beltway, the old saying of “follow the money” was usually used to find the path of evildoers behind an inscrutable crime scene. In the DC political scene, following the money meant discovering where the power lay—both evil and good. For that reason, the “approps” committees were the most powerful ones on the Hill. They developed the budget bills that were voted on by the full Congress before being sent to the president for his signature. (Well, it had always been “his” signature so far in this story.) Every executive branch Department, Agency, Bureau, or Service bowed before these committees at least once a year during their budget testimony, but really the supplication occurred any time the committee requested it.

Simply to revel in this power wasn’t what drew Justine to approps. She saw it as a place where that power could be wielded to really make an impact on the issues. As she scanned the possibilities for professional staffers, she met with a senior one from approps who talked to her about his ability to call just about any organization in the world and get an audience with them if he wanted to learn about a subject. If, say, the CIA was looking to install a new email system, the staffer could not only quiz the agency’s employees about why they made the choices they did, but he could also go out to Microsoft, Cisco, or Oracle in the private sector, or even the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

or MI-6 in other countries and ask them if what the CIA was doing made sense from a business perspective. (While keeping in mind security clearance issues, of course.) If the plan did make sense, he would recommend they get their funding in that year's approps bill. If it didn't, well there were lots of ways to get them to change their minds—tough testimony questions in front of the C-SPAN cameras, denial of funding, highly specific authorizing language in a bill, and any number of back room dealings and negotiations. Not only did this sound like dealing with the issues instead of the voters, but the specific IT examples the staffer used were well tuned to the language Justine and her MIS degree spoke. When Trevor had told her about committees being a place of issues and action, she thought that sounded exciting. When she discovered what the actual daily work was though, she was absolutely giddy with anticipation to begin there. It was the second of many times to come when our heroine was sure that she had found the perfect DC job.

When the day arrived, she finally made the move across the DC equator that bisected the Capitol. She moved from the Senate buildings in the Northeast to the House buildings in the Southeast. This was slightly unusual since most staffers like the relative stability of the six-year terms in the Senate—a nearly perfect amount of time to establish an early career. The House, by comparison, with its two-year turnover was frenetic and fraught with insecurity. The move up the ladder though, from personal staff to professional staff, was well worth this additional worry.

On the day of the move, Justine simply boxed up her few office items and headed over to the Cannon building via two of the three underground trains that connected

congressional office buildings to the Capitol. The single-track tiny trains looked more like a children's ride at Disneyworld than any kind of serious public transportation, but that was ok as it wasn't open to the public and there was very little seriousness about it other than the odd times when a blowhard senator was forced to use it in a jam while running late to a vote. The line was built to allow the members of Congress to come and go between their offices and the House or Senate chambers without having to expose themselves to the elements or the public. In fact though, the trains were much more often used by staffers running errands who either got a kick out of it because they were new, or were showing it off to an out-of-town visitor. Justine, long past the novelty of the train after her first two rides, simply appreciated a place to set her box down for a few minutes.

As she emerged out of the cool, dank tunnels and took the escalator up to the halls of the Cannon Building, Justine felt right at home walking past one after another set of indistinguishable brown doors. The sounds of her heels echoed down the long corridors as she briskly clip-clopped along over the familiar lemon-scent of the recently polished light gray vinyl tiles that lined the floors. The box of her belongings felt unnoticeably light in her arms. She passed others in the halls with such purpose that no one paused for a second to think to offer her a hand or point the way.

Entering her new brown door, Justine had an odd sensation of *déjà vu*. She wondered for just a second if she'd fazed out on the train ride and doubled back without noticing. Being a professional staff member had some definite advantages, but a better office was not one of those bene-

fits. She had traded in six office mates for four, but almost wondered aloud if the Architect of the Capitol had somehow managed to whisk her exact desk across East Capitol Street while she had ridden underneath it. On second glance, the desk was in fact a mirror image of the model she had emptied only a few minutes earlier and so her unpacking was a particularly simple task.

Justine had just about finished placing her belongings when the officemate behind her slammed down his phone. He had obviously been in a tense discussion filled with terse responses of “I see” and “Yes, sir” and “I understand,” but the lack of actual dialogue meant that Justine had been unable to make out who he was talking with. He spun around now though and screamed.

“Aaaaah! Sometimes I don’t know why we’re here. Dammit!”

“Well that’s just what a girl wants to hear on her first day of work. Hi, I’m Justine Swensen.”

“Oh right, the new person. Sorry about that. I meant to send you an email to help get you up to speed, but I guess I’ve missed the boat on that. I’m Bill. Bill Monet.”

Bill was the next great character Justine was to meet on her saga. He was a tall, lean, energetic guy with brown hair kept short in a style that hinted at his military background. He was more of a Wall Street guy by temperament though—impatient, sharp, quick on the uptake, even quicker on the download. He had done a lot of briefings over his careers, and despite his outburst after hanging up the phone, he knew his place in a pecking order...and how to get around it secretly if need be. This all would have made him a fortune as an investment banker, but he was less interested in money than he was in real power. Luckily

for the country, his service as a Marine (OO-rah!) did nothing but increase the patriotism and loyalty to his country that his Army father had unintentionally instilled in him since birth. Bill was married to a sharp woman who was now a partner for one of the local consulting firms. She brought plenty of money home for the two of them, which gave him the freedom to pursue good for the country in the best way he knew how—as a ballbusting public servant with the keys to the Treasury and a long list of tough questions to answer before anyone got past him.

“So, since this is your first day, you’re actually in a perfect position to tell me if I’m crazy or not.” Bill turned completely and locked in on his target. Not the kind that he intended to destroy, but more like a target of human intelligence (HUMINT from his Marine days) that he knew might offer a bit of crucial information. In this case, Justine offered the freshest perspective of someone who had been there less than ten minutes, but who was obviously bright enough to get past the interviews that he knew had been designed to weed out both the power-hungry totalitarians in disguise and the lazy public employees sloughing their way towards their derisive code names of “good citizens,” as in, “Is he a good worker? Well, he’s a good citizen.”

“I read your resume by the way—very impressive,” Bill continued. “I know you’re here to help out on the HHS approps, but we’re all dealing with the same types of problems so it’s still instructive for you to hear this as you get up to speed.” Bill rolled up his white oxford sleeves as he prepared to dive into the details. The no-iron cotton poly blend of his shirt had seen crisper days, but the bright blue tie outside of it and the angular body inside of it

helped to hide that fact. “So, I’ve been working with the Department of Labor for a few years now, and their CFO is a real knob. You’d kind of expect that, right? I mean, who wants to work for Labor of all the cool places in the government? Plus, in previous administrations way too many Republican political appointees just got in there and tried to gut the place to thin any resistance they might face in their efforts to de-regulate and enable ‘free’ markets. None of the A players stuck around through this so the career folks that are left there aren’t exactly the sharpest knives on the bayonets if you know what I mean. Anyway... I’m not going too fast for you am I? This is all good background for you.”

“No, no. I’ve got it.” Justine was drinking from the fire hose now. Bill was fast and dropping inside-DC knowledge to her with every other word out of his mouth and she needed to keep hearing this even if it didn’t all register right away. She correctly guessed that if she’d asked him to slow down, Bill probably would have just decided she was too far behind to bother with.

“Right. So, they’ve been spending money at Labor for years with nothing real to show for it, and no one over there really gives a crap. They all have secure jobs with fancy descriptions that sound impressive so why would they? Well I give a crap, so I drag the CFO in for some on-the-record testimony and start feeding questions to the congressmen to ask him and his staff some pretty basic questions. Like, how much of their funding has gone to salaries verses consumable goods verses durable goods? What’s been the trend on this type of spending over the last decade? How many jobs have been created in the economy during this time? What kind of spending is the

most efficient at driving the outcomes we are looking for in this administration? These are all your basic ROI and investment mix kinds of questions. I ran this by a few private sector chief financial officers and they all said this is exactly how they run their businesses.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. That was the kind of Business Intelligence reports I used to help the Mayo clinic with. Not the same queries obviously, but I’m with you.” Justine was excited to have something to contribute to this. The conversation was unlike anything she had ever heard regarding politics before. People at university or on the campaign trail had only ever talked issues, social theories, or policies—not actual rubber meets the road how do we execute on those ideas kind of talk. She had sat down in her chair without even realizing it and was now leaning in and waiting for Bill to continue.

“Perfect. You get BI tools so I can speed this up. Anyway, what do you think the answer was to these ROI questions?” Bill asked this rhetorically, as if the answer was ever in any doubt. “Not, ‘We’ve been charting those figures over the past twenty-five years and found that the optimum mix of investments is x, y, z.’ Not even, ‘I’m sorry, we don’t have those figures at our fingertips for this session, but we’ll be happy to gather them up and get back to you in x number of days.’ No. The CFO said—and I mean this is on the record, you can look it up—he said, ‘I won’t be able to give you that information. It’s not my job to gather that.’ Can you believe that?!”

Justine’s expression joined in with Bill’s incredulity, but mostly out of sheer momentum from his force of personality. At this point in her career, she didn’t actually know what the job of the CFO of the Department of Labor actu-

ally was, but she wasn't afraid to ask. She started to phrase the question, but Bill was off and running again.

"Not his job. He is in charge of vouchsafing for the expenditure of our tax dollars so he damn well ought to be analyzing it every which way possible to make sure those monies are being spent appropriately. I got the committee chairman to politely remind him of that fact but then he went on this long spiel about how his office had kept detailed records of how every last dollar that they had been appropriated had been spent. For years, they had closed their books within ninety days after the end of the year and not been a penny off in accounting for how much money had gone out the door. That was the job of the Office of the Chief Financial Officer and he was proud of the staff that he oversaw to do it. They could not, nor should not, be expected to code every single one of those expenditures according to different data schemes so that they might one day be able to run minute analyses in response to a random staffer's questions. That would be a waste of the taxpayers' money to have all that information sitting at one's fingertips."

"But that's just lazy!" Justine blurted out, interrupting Bill's tirade. "If he's already gathering that data, it hardly costs anything extra to code it and analyze it. Do they just not want to know what the answers are?"

"You're sharp. I like it," Bill said rather directly. It was his style. "That's part of it, that they don't want to prove that they are ineffectual, but I'm guessing it's more a sin of omission than commission. They probably do think they are being effective and just don't feel the need to prove it. Anyway, back at the session, when he said all this, I just sighed and the other members of the committee pushed us

along and thanked the CFO for his due diligence over the years and for coming in that day. I didn't get a chance to push anyone to ask him how he was planning to not keep wasting the taxpayers' money by merely accounting for the same amount being spent on the same efforts year after year without any results. Nor did I get to ask what the return on investment would be on the salary of a few extra budget analysts and data coders in return for the billions of dollars we may or may not have flushed down the toilet at his Department over the last twenty-five years."

Justine slumped back in her chair. She thought about how amazing (and dispiriting at the same time) this stuff was and she hadn't even figured out where the office supplies or bathrooms were yet.

"So, battle lost, war is still on." Bill perked right up again. He was obviously a fighter and in this for the long haul. "I made my points and just planned on working behind the scenes to start getting some of this analysis done in their shop. I could probably hit up some press people to highlight his 'not my job' remarks and pressure them through personal embarrassment. Or maybe push it towards some consultants who would gladly lobby the House by telling them they could help set up an analysis tool for Labor if only *someone* would earmark some money for them to do so. But the easiest way is just to start putting the squeeze on their appropriated dollars in the next budget cycle. We could easily make statements about 'a lack of confidence in the usefulness of their past expenditures' and then push for them to do what I was asking for with the promise that we would return their base funding with some enhancements in the following year if they followed

through. That is the most straightforward way to handle it since technically it is exactly what our job is.”

“And I’m sure there’d be issues with lowly staffers pulling strings behind the scenes if they were ever discovered,” Justine offered with a knowing smile.

“Exactly. Even though we do get away with that all the time. But back to my first line of defense. So a few weeks after that first budget briefing, Labor’s budget comes up through OMB and not only was it at the same level they had presented to us, it had a few extra funding requests in it. Either OMB had some items they wanted to add, or Labor was playing a negotiation tactic of asking for more than they needed so that we could make cuts, feel good about doing our jobs, and they would wind up right back where they wanted to be all along. Well, I wasn’t having any of that. I recommended to the committee members that we not only lop off those extra requests, but take some money out of their base as well until they can come up with some proof that they know what they are doing with their money. That was just last week.” Bill paused as the realization of what was coming next washed over him again. The logic and strength of his story seemed to give him a belief that the ending would come out different this time, but now that he was there, he knew it wouldn’t be.

“What you heard when you came in,” Bill continued, more subdued now, “was the ranking head of the committee, Congressman Worshick, telling me that not only could they not cut Labor’s budget during a time of high unemployment, they would have to give them a plus-up of two extra percent to show that they were serious about tackling this issue.”

“Wait. So if theoretically the Department of Labor has been doing such a bad job that they are actually causing more unemployment, the reward for them is more money?” Justine asked with eyebrows raised suitably high for Bill’s expectations.

“You got it. I love this job and wouldn’t be anywhere else, but that’s definitely one of the frustrating downsides—the disconnect between handing out budget dollars and actually holding leadership accountable. This should be one of the biggest sticks in the bag for beating some efficiency into government, but it just gets too politicized when it’s run by...politicians.” Bill visibly forced himself to spit the last word out.

“Watch it. I just came from one of those monsters and I happened to like mine,” Justine said to lighten the mood. “But let me ask you something else Bill. If we can’t wield the stick, who does hold these agencies accountable? Somebody’s making this ship move. It hasn’t run aground yet.”

“Well, it’s a mix of a lot of things,” Bill replied. “I’d say personal pride from some of the good leaders out there, or the fear that comes from the press putting big failures in the headlines, but the most consistent pressure comes from GAO—accountability is their middle name, right?” Bill gave them a nod of grudging respect. “They’re another source of pressure we can bring to bear on these agencies. A few words from us, and one of their audit teams just might magically appear out of nowhere to look into some obscure program. We’ll get into that when we get to the advanced approps class, but for now let’s get you going on some basic fundamentals of writing bills...and finding your way to the coffee shop.”

And so our heroine settled in nicely on her committee. She threw herself into the work and almost forgot about the gnawing unease that ate at her from this conversation. She tried to chalk it up to being overwhelmed on her first day, but within nine months she began to see the same frustrating processes repeat themselves over and over again. The marine in Bill loved the perpetual feeling of battle. Justine looked for higher ground and put in an application with the Government Accountability Office.

Chapter 4

Government Accountability Office

By now, Justine and her husband Mike had comfortably settled into their three-story row home on South Carolina Avenue a few blocks southeast of the Capitol building. The wide street covered in shade from mature oak and elm trees reminded the happy couple of their quiet Minnesota lives. As one of the state streets, it ran diagonally through the planned grid of the city, cutting across its orderly procession. But since it was one of the slices that never led any closer to the Capitol building, always keeping a cautious distance away and dead-ending at an unimportant local park, it was a thoroughly ignored thoroughfare considering its proximity to so many restaurants, metro stations, and shopping outlets that surrounded the halls of power where Justine and thousands of others worked every day.

Behind the house, Mike had transformed the garage into a workshop for the furniture he made. When they first met, our heroine had been quite taken with the quiet comfort Mike exuded about his trade. It was only after several months of courtship that Justine discovered Mike was not “just” a furniture maker. He was also the grandson of Ernest Swensen, the founder of Swensen’s ice cream parlors who sold the franchise for tens of millions of dollars before his death. As one of the few heirs, Mike would never have to work, but he found that craftsmanship—in wood instead of ice cream—was in his bones and it gave his life meaning and purpose. His skills were put to good use in the hundred-year-old house as well. Carpet was ripped out

and original oak floors were sanded and polished. Wallpaper came down and dark red brick was exposed and refinished. White painted trim was replaced with natural wood. What the couple had bought as a cluttered fixer-upper had become an elegant and understated home after three years of hard work.

Justine's brother Jack Elroy was largely unimpressed by this simple home. He had come for a visit and insisted on pointing out the sidewalks that were pushed askance by tree roots, the slanted floors of the settled house, and the lack of uniformity in neighbors' yards and homes in every direction. Justine loved these quirks of Capitol Hill though, just as she tried to love the oddities of her older sibling.

Jack had moved from home the first chance he got. He was a typical first-born explorer and happily left Minnesota when it was time for college, heading off for fun in the sun at the University of Southern California. He never looked back. He studied business because it was a practical, real-world alternative to his parent's touchy-feely fields of child development and positive psychology. Once in L.A., Jack was also overtaken by the glamorous new Hollywood lifestyle that worshiped money, fame, and celebrity, and his studies allowed him to pursue a career in investment banking to keep up with the pursuits the in crowd was chasing. Now, thirty years old and a confirmed bachelor, he had the big salary and big debt to be fully leveraged and living as large as possible. Justine tried to see his excesses as at least a non-destructive form of rebellion from the lives their parents had shown them, and it was a measure of her understanding and compassion that despite their differences Jack still found time to swing by DC on his way back from a business trip to New York. Instead of an early flight back

to the west coast for a half-day of work at the office, Jack decided to train down to DC and catch the afternoon flight back. After all, that would still get him home in time for a night on the town.

After a quick greeting, Mike headed for the refuge of his workshop. As an inheritor of a wealth he hardly touched, he never understood his brother-in-law's money-chasing ways. It wasn't that Mike didn't have the patience to deal with him—Mike had the patience to watch varnish dry if it meant a better end product—but he knew his quiet presence would be a distraction. He knew our heroine could absorb any shots of sibling rivalry directed her way, but she might unnecessarily go out of her way to defend any perceived slights toward her husband. He had seen that dynamic before so he wisely removed himself from the equation to let Justine and Jack catch up one on one in a way they never quite found the time for on the phone.

Sitting on opposite ends of the brown leather couch in the living room, the pair took turns trying to interest each other with tales from their opposite lives. They also took turns hiding their disapproval by quietly picking at the tray of muffins and fruit that Justine had laid out on the coffee table for brunch, instead of picking at one another's motives and beliefs. As their conversation wound cautiously through minefield after minefield, the sun crept across the hardwood floor spotlighting random dust particle movements and collisions. Finally, as the wind-up clock on the mantelpiece opposite them struck ten, Jack struck a chord that inevitably wound up our heroine.

"I just don't get it," he said. "Working for a Senator, that I understood. Even the Appropriations Committee, the way you explained that to me, that sounded cool. But

the Government Affairs Office? I don't know why you'd want to go to work there. Why don't you come and live out on the west coast with me? My firm needs IT skills. The startups out there are minting millionaires. You could make a fortune out there."

"It's the Government Accountability Office, Jack," she said, mildly correcting him. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that word would get past you. You know it's not about the money for me though. Besides, I do just fine here."

"Oh right. I forgot about Mr. Moneybags out back." Jack bit into another muffin, choosing to ignore the sisterly dig about his lack of accountability and reacting instead with a rib of his own. "So why do you two live like this?" he asked while pointing around the cozy room and scattering crumbs as he did so.

"It's enough for us. Plenty even. Here take this." She handed him a plate to place on his lap. "Why would we mortgage our future to have more today than we really need?"

Jack wolfed down the other half of his muffin and ignored the plate. "See, that's your problem. You have to learn to live in the moment. If you lost everything tomorrow, you'd regret not enjoying it while you had it. If you make it even bigger in the future, you'd regret waiting to enjoy it. Either way, you should be having fun while you can."

"But none of what you call fun is what makes a person happy. I'm trying to make a difference in society by being part of a government that is helping all of humanity. That's where my joy comes from. What are you doing that makes a difference?"

Jack had no problem rising to the familiar challenge. “Me? I work in the most important industry in the nation. We’re the lube that makes the economic machine hum. I see deals come across my desk for millions of dollars every day. We make that money flow. I really wish you would come out to join us and see what that kind of difference actually feels like. That’s where the best and brightest are. We must be doing something right.”

“I think you need to define best and brightest a little more carefully,” Justine replied. “Without our government regulations, you’d bankrupt our country. Didn’t you study the Great Depression? We needed the Glass-Steagall act to buffer us all from your wild speculation and conflicts of interest.”

“Yeah, yeah, but that was like a hundred years ago, Justine. The markets are more efficient now and much smarter. I’m telling you, the private sector is where all the money and action is at.”

“Are you kidding?” Justine asked as she set her coffee down and swung to face Jack more directly. She was getting a little tired of this line of questioning from her older brother. “The government is something like 40% of GDP. We deal with numbers that blow your Fortune 500 companies out of the water. America may have needed talent in the private sector in the 1970’s when we were getting our butts kicked by Japan and Germany, but companies like Microsoft, Apple, GE, Boeing, UPS, Google, and Amazon are world leaders now. What America needs to compete for the future is a more efficient government. That’s why I’m here.”

Jack almost spit his coffee out. “Efficient government? Good luck with that!”

“Look, I know the press likes to point out all the money we waste, but how do you think your office parties would look to your corporate shareholders if the press had as keen an interest in splashing your debauchery all over the papers? Or all the failed mergers and acquisitions that occurred just to inflate egos but actually ended up destroying wealth and jobs?”

“Sure that happens,” Jack said, now putting his coffee down as the debate was heating up. “But that’s just the thing that makes us better—creative destruction. Competition allows the boneheads that make those moves to go out of business. When was the last time the government went out of business?”

“In America? Never.” Justine paused for a moment. “But it has happened to other countries that have defaulted on their debts, and it has been hell on their citizens. When the Soviet Union collapsed, that was a good thing to stop tyranny from government, but life savings were wiped out and tyranny from the mafia filled the vacuum. Individual citizens were crushed by an inefficient government. I want to do my part to make sure that never comes close to happening here.”

“Isn’t efficient government just less government?” Jack said, pressing his point. “It’s the government that is the friction that gums everything up. If you really want to make a difference, you should probably just get out.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” she responded with equal force. “I believe government has a big role in actually making markets more efficient. At least from a macroeconomics perspective. You must have taken that course in school, right?”

“Yeah,” Jack said a little unsure of where this was going. “But I haven’t ever used any of it.”

“Well, maybe you remember the concept of perfectly competitive markets?”

“Remind me,” he said in the tone of an older brother hating to be lectured at by his younger sister.

“Well, they don’t exist, but if they did, in theory they would have six aspects. Just a second.” She got up and walked around her end of the couch to face the built-in shelves holding dozens of books. She quickly pulled a large textbook out and thumbed through it. “Here it is. Perfectly competitive markets are characterized by: one, many suppliers with an insignificant share of the market; two, identical output produced by each firm; three, consumers with perfect information about the products and their prices; four, all firms having equal access to resources; five, no barriers to entry or exit in the long run; and six, no externalities in production or consumption, which unfairly transfer costs or benefits between the private and social spheres.” She held the book out for Jack to see as she sat back down next to him on the couch.

Jack looked them over for just a second. “Ok, sure. I remember these. They are things that drive profits to zero since no one has any advantage over anyone else. Those are all things we look out for at investment banks to make sure the companies we are investing in can avoid those traps.”

“Right!” Justine exclaimed. “That’s the way you would look at it because you are trying to maximize an individual’s profits. What if you were looking at it from society’s perspective though?”

Jack thought for a moment. He could feel a trap somewhere here, but he ventured on anyway. “Well, the whole pie is bigger in these kinds of perfectly competitive markets, but no one is making any money. That’s why these kinds of markets don’t exist. Who wants that?”

Justine jumped right in after getting the answer she had hoped to hear. “Us consumers that’s who! That may be true that no one could hold profitable advantages over the long run, but in the short term, businesses would have temporary advantages. If they worked hard, they could maintain their positions. If they don’t, well that’s where that creative destruction you were so proud of would come along. It would just get there a little quicker. In the end, society wins doesn’t it?”

“I guess so. But that’s an awfully daunting task for managers. You can see why they prefer to fight this from ever happening. But what does this have to do with what we were talking about?”

Justine straightened a little and looked directly into her brother’s eyes. “You asked me why I don’t just get out of government. Why I just don’t stop gumming up the works. Well, government plays a crucial role in making these markets as competitive as possible. Take a look at the principles again.” She pointed into the textbook again for Jack to follow along. “One, many small suppliers. Government busts monopolies to help this happen. Skip number two, as that is up to the firms to innovate and differentiate their products. But three, consumers have perfect information. Government regulation makes sure labels and advertising are truthful and complete. Four, all firms have equal access to resources. Government enforces contracts, discrimination laws, and has a monopoly on the use of force, which

makes sure no one's might makes right and everyone gets to play in the economy. Five, no barriers to exit or entry in the long run. The government administers bankruptcy proceedings for easy exits and invests in basic science that would be too big an investment for entry into many markets. Six, no externalities in production or consumption. This is a big one where government's role includes lots of things like sin taxes that make sure society doesn't pay the cost of a few people drinking, smoking, or driving themselves to death; environmental regulation and enforcement to make sure the tragedy of the commons does not ruin our scarce resources; and providing basic education, which makes sure the public cost of ignorance is not inflicted on society and the benefits of an informed citizenry are enjoyed by all. Without government, your markets would break down and be much more inefficient. So many people on the right side of the political spectrum like to argue for the power of free markets, but they don't understand that those are much weaker than properly regulated markets. Sure the pendulum can swing too far and overregulation can dampen things, but I would argue that the advancing sophistication of government is exactly what has enabled the growth of the modern economy. Its ability to correct flaws in the market makes all of us better off. You can argue if you want about the proper location of the pendulum, but you can't just try to lop it off."

The clock on the mantel struck again and Jack looked at his watch realizing he had to leave soon to catch his flight. He sighed and said, "Fine, fine. You win, sis. You can put your textbook away." He got up and started to collect his things. Before he got to the door though, he turned with one more thought.

“Let’s say all of that is true in theory. I still say government will never achieve that mission in reality because the pay is so lousy, the jobs are too secure, and the public unions are too strong. You’ll never achieve this mission you are talking about. You’re doomed to a life of frustration if you think otherwise. Take it as advice from an older brother who just wants to see his kid sister be happy.”

Justine unlocked the door and gave her brother a peck on the cheek. “Thanks, Jack. That’s sweet of you to say. But we have people who will literally die for their mission. I don’t think you can say that about anyone in the private sector. I think that makes it possible for us to be even more effective than the business world. We just have to be better at tapping into that passion. I won’t be happy until I’ve given that a try.”

With that, Jack headed back to L.A. and our heroine continued on her journey. She was still a government employee in Washington, but she was now about to burrow below the superficial layer of the political realm.

*

The first five months of working as an analyst with GAO were fantastic for Justine. She felt like she was back in school again hanging out with her friends. The same skills that made her a successful student—the ability to research, read, read, read, write well, divide large projects into manageable parts, and construct logical arguments and recommendations—were the same skills that GAO recruited for and rewarded.

In particular, Justine had really hit it off with the senior analyst she worked under on her first few projects. Dr. Au-

drey Portman was one of those rare people whose brain was like a massive sponge that never leaked. She received a PhD in Political Science from Harvard after a distinguished undergrad at Dartmouth University. Whereas most doctoral students take five to eight years to write their theses, Audrey had knocked hers out in a mere three. And six months of that was waiting for her supervisors to read through her voluminous work before deciding she was ready for upgrades and defenses and the other hurdles of the doctoral process. Audrey was a machine at her computer. All time seemed to stop for her as she just wrote and wrote. The faculty at Harvard encouraged her to pursue life as a professor, promising that she would find great success as a prolific publisher, but Audrey had absolutely no interest in teaching. It was much more interesting for her to absorb herself in her own learning rather than bother trying to teach others the same thing for years on end. Writing up her findings along the way was just another way to cement her own learning, and in fact gave it the precision required of putting it down in words.

When Audrey first came across the trove of audit reports on GAO's website during her doctoral research, it was like an aquarium-raised fish discovering the ocean. She couldn't believe there had been hundreds of people like her gathering facts and making recommendations on seemingly every intricate inner working of the government for decades. Headed by the comptroller general of the United States, GAO was *the* final stopping place for the proverbial and actual buck of the federal government. Named for fifteen-year terms—an eternity in the DC universe—the comptroller was usually a no-nonsense, apoliti-

cal appointee whose job it was to make sure that the bureaucracy never ground to too much of a halt.

But there was so much to look into. The comptroller was in some sense responsible for an annual budget of approximately three trillion dollars. Two-thirds of that went to entitlements like Medicare and Social Security, and one-third went to discretionary funding like the Departments of Homeland Security, Veterans Affairs, Energy, Treasury, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Labor, Agriculture, State, Interior, Justice, Transportation, and Defense. The last of those the largest at \$500 billion annually—enough to place it number one on the Fortune 500 list if it were a private company. Plus, there were a half dozen other independent agencies. All told, there were over two million federal employees, each of whom were involved in one or several business processes that may or may not be operating effectively at any given moment in history. It was nearly an infinite source of analysis that had barely been tapped despite the oceans of paperwork that might lead one to believe otherwise.

Audrey had surveyed this ocean and was completely consumed by it. She downloaded dozens and dozens of GAO reports and read them in her spare time. She subscribed to their email alert notices too so she could be up on the very latest information of what was happening in the government. But most importantly, she knew she had found a home where she could dedicate her career and feed her need for reading and writing.

Audrey had been working at GAO for nine years when Justine met her. Our heroine was immediately impressed. During her five months on the job, Justine had found Audrey to be a superhuman wealth of knowledge about all of

the questions she had about the way things ran in the federal government. She was also a great role model for leading her teams by example. Even though the group might have up to eight other people working on it, she could often out-write all of them put together. Justine was inspired, engaged, and really enjoying life in this new atmosphere. Most importantly, she felt she was getting *in there* and making a difference.

Our heroine had been on three audits by now. She arrived just in time to help proofread the first audit report. Audrey always liked to introduce new staff to the work this way so they could first see what an end product looked like before starting at the beginning of the next project with the research and interviews. GAO reports had a very consistent look and feel to them, and the sooner you became accustomed to them, the sooner you could start adding to the backlog of reports for Audrey to read. During the next two audits, Justine was amazed at the level of cooperation she got from the agencies she was working with. Everyone bent over backwards to rearrange their schedules for Justine's interview requests. Whatever reports Justine specifically asked for, they were happy to share. All of the employees seemed to sincerely want to improve, and expressed genuine anticipation for the reports and, most importantly, the recommendations that Justine and the team would produce. Justine felt a growing pride with the publication of each of those first three reports.

Then our heroine experienced her first follow-up review.

It had been four months since that first report had been finished—a rather short piece reviewing the grants administration process at the Federal Emergency Man-

agement Agency. FEMA had in general been making a great effort at getting money out the door for all of the emergency preparedness grants they funneled out to state and local governments, but there were a few technological upgrades they could make and some personnel they could add to the process to make it much more efficient, getting the money out faster and allocated according to a better risk management model. The officials at FEMA replied immediately to the GAO report and stated that they concurred with these recommendations and looked forward to implementing them. At the time, just three weeks into the job, Justine remembered feeling like this was a great win-win. All that needed to happen was to invest a few hundred thousand dollars upfront to grease the wheels of the process, and millions of grant dollars would get where it needed to go in order to prevent potentially billions of dollars in disaster-related damage claims later. It made perfect sense.

Then, an email message from Audrey popped into Justine's inbox. At first glance, it looked like every other ordinary communication. Subject: "FEMA Update to Report GAO-10-109." Message: "Good morning team, Here's the latest response from FEMA.—Audrey." Only when she opened the attachment was Justine shocked by what she was reading. "...agreed wholeheartedly... intend to follow...no progress as yet...no funding at this time...no FTE available...staff responding to hurricane Frederick...look forward to further updating you..." Absolutely nothing had been done, and from the sound of it, nothing was likely to be done for some time. Justine printed off the letter and marched over to Audrey's office to discuss what this meant.

“Hi there, do you have a minute?” Justine poked her head around the corner of the office door. Inside the windowless office, Audrey was surrounded by shelves and shelves of reports. In any other place, Justine would assume they were unread and merely there to contribute a musty odor to the stale air in the room. Here though, Justine knew that each one had been read thoroughly. She used to think this was a representation of scholarly omniscience, but was suddenly wondering if the paper just provided an eight and a half inch buffer from the real world.

“Sure. What’s going on?” Audrey had an open door policy and welcomed the chance to hear from one of her team members. She slid away from her keyboard and listened intently.

“Well, I just got that response from FEMA you sent out and I was wondering if we could talk about it a little.”

“Right. Pretty standard letter. I was happy to see the tone so agreeable with what we had recommended to them,” said Audrey very matter-of-factly.

“But they aren’t doing anything!”

The passion surprised both Audrey and Justine. Our heroine had not yet come to grips with the frustration she would be facing in DC. She’d had a good few months and immediately thought she had found her final niche where her dreams could be realized. Audrey, however, had long ago settled in to her orbit and was bewildered by the newcomer’s expectations.

“Well of course not. It’s only been four months. The budget process for getting funding for the technology upgrades will take at least a year—and that’s if they are very lucky to have a great IT team in the back who are waiting and ready to come up with the cost estimate, business plan,

and budget justification in time for the spring submission process. In fact, given the timing of our report, they probably won't be able to get that in until next year at the earliest. And that's just the IT money. We told them to hire five new people too, but that'll take at least two years based on what I've seen. First they need to get the FTE's. Full Time Equivalents," Audrey explained to the puzzled look staring across her desk. "That will take an authorization from Congress as well as an appropriation of funds during the budget process. Our report should help them obtain all that, but they'll still need their HR people to fill out all the justifications and paperwork. That's before they can even hire anyone, of course. These positions don't require a security clearance so they might be able to get them in there in four to six months after the funding comes through, but that's only if they don't get blocked by any veterans. And of course if there aren't any big hurricanes bogging them down. With Frederick right now for example, I'm sure they're swamped."

Justine's head was swimming at the whole new set of issues being thrown up in front of her. "But our recommendations could save billions of dollars and maybe even lives! Can't we do something to make sure this actually happens? It just makes good business sense."

"I wish it were that easy." Audrey had seen this a hundred times by now. She'd already forgotten the surprise she first felt when she uncovered how these things actually happened, but it was all just part of the larger task of learning more and more about what occurred within this bureaucracy. She was happy to play her part in bringing it all to light. "Granted, we are the first article in the constitution for a reason, but the legislative branch really just pro-

vides oversight and direction for the funds spent in the federal government. The executive branch is where they actually, you know, execute things. They have their own rules and regulations, which are there for a reason. As much as we'd like to, we certainly can't start recommending they go around those rules. We can just give the goals and then let them find their way towards them."

"But that hardly sounds like we are holding anyone accountable," Justine replied more calmly this time, beginning to accept her fate. "I thought that was our middle name. It's kind of the reason I came here."

Audrey peered over her glasses at Justine as if she were a fact that didn't fit in. "We hold people accountable. It's maybe just a matter of short term versus long term. You can't expect things to change overnight in this role. That might sound demotivating, but while you wait there's still so much more out there to keep looking into. It's a never-ending source. Once you've been here a while, you'll start to see the progress on the things you've recommended."

"Yeah, but at what expense? The world is moving faster and faster, especially in my field of IT refreshments. If we wait two years for movement on our recommendations, they'll be completely out of date."

"I suppose that sounds true. But that's what follow-up reports are for." Audrey nodded her head at the reports surrounding her, hoping they would lend weight to her argument. "We can stay in touch with the people in the executive branch and continue to guide them as they move through the process."

Justine dutifully nodded agreement, but inside she wondered if she'd just discovered the next step in her path. Guiding from afar was beginning to sound much too slow

when you could roll up your sleeves and jump in to get it done instead. Little did our heroine know just how high those sleeves would have to go to keep from getting soiled in the swamp.

Chapter 5

HR Hurdle

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Mike looked up from his dinner and studied Justine. “You know you just have to say the word and I can pack up my shop and move us anywhere in the country you’d rather be.”

Justine was trying to enjoy the celebratory dinner her husband had prepared for her. The light smoky aroma of the grilled wild salmon mingled with the earthy vapors coming from the glasses of Viognier. The bright pink flesh harmonized with the muted yellows and greens of the new potatoes and green beans on the side of the plate. Everything melded together just as it should. Instead of savoring the pleasures and asking for seconds though, Justine had been pushing the food around her plate and staring at a scratch on the restored dining hutch that she hadn’t noticed before. The scraping of her fork along the porcelain plate was muffled by the cozy confines of the decorated room, but not enough for Mike not to notice her actions and guess at some reasons behind them.

“Why would you say that, Mike?” she replied. Justine looked across the short width of the table and saw that Mike was nearly done with his plate. “I guess I’m a little nervous about tomorrow’s appointment, but nothing drastic enough to make me want to give up and move away.”

“It’s just that this will be your fourth job here already. Has it been that bad at GAO?” Mike stopped eating to listen carefully to what Justine was saying with her words and her body language.

“I don’t know,” Justine said as she lowered her eyes to her plate. “I’ve learned a lot there, and the friends are great, but...in the end, everyone just seems to be a little too happy to just be playing his or her part in the big dance instead of trying to change the tune. I think I need to get out before I start losing my respect for the people there.”

“Do you really think it’s going to be any different anywhere else? Everyone starts off idealistic and hopeful that they can be the ones to make a difference, but eventually most of them find themselves stuck with a mortgage on a big house in the suburbs. I hear it from my clients all the time. No one has the freedom to stay in a small place like you and I do. They have kids and have to get them out of the city’s schools. Then they feel trapped by their circumstances and just resign themselves to punching the clock in a meaningful, if ineffectual, decent-paying job with the most reliable employer on the planet. That can’t be a recipe for good co-workers anywhere you go in DC.”

Justine took a sip of her wine and considered this before replying. “I’ve got to try, Mike. It’s not about the other people. That story is going to be the same in pretty much any big city in America. This is about finding the situation that’s right for me. And I still think Washington has that spot somewhere. I’ve tried the legislative side of the house; now it’s time to try the executive side.”

“But it’s already been a pain just to try to get in that door. Don’t you think that might be a bad sign of things to come?”

“It hasn’t been all that bad. Deputy Assistant Director Johnson, the guy who has been recruiting me, was basically able to have the position tailor made for me. The

KSA essay questions for the job looked almost like they were pulled directly from my resume.”

“Then why do you think you had to write them three times?”

“It’s only been six months, Mike,” Justine said, trying to curtail the frustration she was feeling. She knew deep down that Mike’s pointed questions were only sharpened by his concern. “The federal hiring process is difficult for everyone. This is actually going better than most of the stories I’ve heard. I don’t know anyone else who’s actually gotten a positive reply from a usajobs.gov posting. I know the Secret Service has lots of unfilled IT positions, and from all our GAO audits over the past two years, I know every agency in the Department of Homeland Security needs help these days. I was bound to get in eventually. DAD Johnson told me it was just an HR snafu. Or three,” she conceded the point that Mike was about to raise. “Besides, it’s the Secret Service! They’re the most elite law enforcement agency in the world—as long as you don’t ask the FBI.” She smiled as she repeated the line she’d already heard numerous times during her audits. “Once I get in there, I’m sure things will be much better.”

“If you say so. But I should probably start putting away nickels for every time I hear you say that about a new job.”

“Fair enough,” she smiled. “But that’s just who I am I suppose. What about you though? Are you unhappy here? Is that why you are giving me the third degree?”

“No, no. That’s not it. You know I love all the old colonial row houses and Victorian homes in this part of the country, and there’s always a tide of people moving in and

out of the city who are looking for a new piece of furniture. This isn't about me."

It never was with Mike. And though our heroine was glad for his support, a small part of her began to feel the pressure of dedicating their lives only to her higher aspirations. She wondered why Mike never longed to be part of something bigger than making furniture. She put these thoughts aside for now though and reached into her purse hanging on the chair next to her to diffuse the tension. She pulled out her sunglasses, popped them on, and put a finger to her ear. "What's that red team leader? Tell Ethan Allen he should stop worrying then?"

"Ha, ha. That's hilarious." Mike grinned at his Special Agent across the table.

"Did you get that? That's your code name, Mr. furniture man."

"Yeah, I got it. Now eat your meal or you're going to get it. I thought we were celebrating you not getting another rejection letter from HR. So why are you so nervous about tomorrow?"

"That's the thing. I was told over the phone I was selected for the job, but that they wanted me to come in for a 'discussion' about my application. I asked if it was an interview and the woman was very quick to tell me not to use that word for it. So now I just don't know what to think or how to prepare."

"Well no sense in spoiling a good fish over that. I know you'll knock 'em dead no matter what they ask. So trust that and eat up."

"Thanks, Mike," Justine said. She put a potato on her fork and felt a little better.

*

The next morning at 8:45, Justine had to pinch herself as she waited in the lobby of a sleek metal and glass building a few blocks from the White House. She had already worked in a few awe inspiring places in Washington, but there was still something extra impressive about this tight-lipped organization and the way they didn't need to have their name on the building outside—even in this ego driven city. It didn't hurt that they were also fully deserving of their nickname as “the best dressed law enforcement agency.” The sobriquet was earned out of the necessity for the agents to be able to blend in and look acceptable while they were on TV with any of the politicians or foreign heads of state they protected. That was why Justine was particularly shocked to see what had just come into the lobby to escort her through security.

Debbie Demeroff was an unkempt mess. She had clearly squeezed her hips and thighs into a brown polyester skirt because she knew that its dimensions and relative slipperiness would enable her to make it through the security turnstiles. The blouse and cardigan, having no such constraints in their environment, were allowed to run wild. Collars overlapped, buttons missed their targets, and sleeves were tugged to different levels for which no account of heat or cold could suggest a logical reason. She was only in her mid-forties, but the inartistically placed makeup and dour creases folded below the lower corners of her lips made her look much older. Although she had been manning the front lines of the HR department for over twenty years, and many of the employees who made it past her gauntlet wished she would have retired by now, she was

facing another twenty to thirty years on the job. She may have been counting the days until she was eligible for retirement, but deep down she knew that barring a miracle in the investment luck of a Thrift Savings Plan manager, her government-sponsored 401k alone would never cover for the shambles that the rest of her finances were in. She needed this job, she needed it to stay exactly as it was, and she knew it.

“Justine? Justine Swensen?” Debbie entered the lobby and looked down at the post-it note she had plastered to her thumb. She had read the name aloud as if she were calling out bingo numbers at a senior citizens home even though Justine and two other men in police uniforms were the only people in the lobby.

Justine stood up smoothly. “Yes, that’s me. Hi.” She strode over confidently towards Debbie, her hand outstretched in the customary professional greeting position.

“Oh, you don’t want to do that. I’m coming down with a cold and I’d hate to pass it on to you. Especially with you being such a small thing and all.” Debbie looked up her nose at Justine who was a clear five inches taller than her, but in terms of mass she was absolutely correct. And she had no compunction about establishing just exactly who was in charge here. “Follow me,” she said and slid her way past security after a brief flash of her ID badge.

Justine tried to follow her through the turnstiles but felt a sharp punch across the thighs from the unmoving security bars.

“Ma’am,” a tinny voice blared through the speaker in front of the security window next to the gate. “You have to check in over here.”

“Oh, yes,” said Debbie from the other side of the turnstile. “You have to go over there and show them two forms of identification to get a temporary badge for the day.” Despite having escorted dozens of new people into the building, Debbie still failed to understand why they never knew the security protocol that she’d been following for years. “I thought you’d have done that already. I’ll just wait over here.”

Fortunately, Justine had the ID’s on her. She had been through this kind of drill before, but was trying to follow Debbie’s lead. She understood now though that this was a bad idea. Badge in hand, Justine returned to follow Debbie—a little more cautiously. After the security doors, they passed through a stunning central atrium that extended all the way up to the topmost tenth floor. Elegant stairwells with glass panels instead of balustrades lined the near atrium wall. As they passed the stairwells, Justine tipped her head back to look at the dozens of offices perched over her on the opposite side. Every room had glass windows enabling their occupants to look down upon the entryway. The cold air falling the entire height of the building seemed to go right down Justine’s back. Debbie ignored all this and headed straight over to the elevator banks and waited with the mass of people punching in at 9:05 am. When the elevator arrived, they got in without a word, and Justine stifled a groan as Debbie punched the ‘2’ button. Luckily, the ‘3’, ‘4’, ‘5’, ‘6’, and ‘8’ buttons had been punched as well so the additional burden they were inflicting on the other passengers was only incremental. In fact, they provided the first banality of the day that was so comforting in an office like this.

“Looks like we’re on the local today!” offered an older bald man in slightly mismatched blazer and chinos. He clearly relished his chance to be the source of the quick wit today as several others in the car chuckled and nodded in agreement.

Approximately two seconds later, the elevator bonged and the doors started to open. “Excuse me, getting off,” Debbie hissed authoritatively, having to push her way out from the back of the elevator.

“Thanks. Sorry,” Justine said as she squeezed past the others as well. She followed Debbie back out of the elevator bank and into her tiny office. There were stacks of paper on every horizontal surface. Had the atrium been a conventional source of fresh air—instead of fulfilling its actual design function as a buffer in the event of a bomb attack—the slight breeze would have toppled Debbie’s backlog of work and set the hiring process back for months.

“Have a seat,” Debbie said as she waved towards the one clear spot in the room. Regular sitting and waiting by visitors had provided one small benefit of keeping paper from establishing a foothold there and sprouting another pile. “So, I understand someone here really wants to hire you,” she began, clearly intimating that it was not her.

“Yes, that’s right. DAD...”

“At-tat-tat-tat.” Debbie cut off the response to her apparently rhetorical remark. “I can’t hear about that. It goes against the merit selection process to have someone pre-selected for a job. These agents running around trying to recruit people are going to get themselves in trouble one of these days. It’s a good thing I’m here to protect them.”

“But he gave me a recruiting brochure that he said HR had given him. I thought we were doing everything by the book.”

Debbie looked at Justine like she was an infant life form from another world. “How can I say this so that you’ll understand? Those brochures are just to be handed out at official recruiting events to simply encourage people to look at our website for general job openings, which they can then apply for as they see fit. I and my staff review the applications and pass on the ones that qualify according to the position classification guidelines.”

“I understand that perfectly well,” said Justine, trying to reign in any anger that might further complicate this process. “And I was glad to get the news that I was the most qualified applicant this time around.”

“I didn’t say you were the most qualified,” Debbie corrected her. “I already pre-qualified several fine candidates for this position during the previous two openings, but the hiring manager rejected them. This is an IT Specialist position and the other candidates had not only excellent Microsoft Word and Excel qualifications listed on their resumes, but even some experience using ‘em-ess-axe-ess’, a very complicated database program as you may or may not know.”

Justine was shocked by the pretension Debbie had at playing the part of subject matter expert in a subject she clearly knew very little about. “If you need those skills, I know what MS-Access is. I just didn’t list basic Microsoft Office programs on my resume. I thought the MIS degree, the C++ programming I did at the Mayo clinic, and the Oracle financials I developed during my summer intern-

ship would have been enough to prove my technical expertise.”

“Well that may or may not be relevant,” Debbie continued nonplussed, “but the other candidates were veterans as well and we need to improve our hiring numbers for that group.”

Justine knew what she was up against now. She had heard about the fact that once a veteran makes it over the hurdle of the qualification process, they had to be selected. It was one of the big perks intended to make re-entry into civilian life much easier for the men and women who sacrificed so much to serve their country. The problem, as she had heard over and over during many of her audits, was that a lot of veterans just used this as a *carte blanche* to apply for any and every job out there that would be a promotion for themselves, and too many HR hiring managers weren't able to distinguish if they were actually qualified or not. Justine figured the executives were over-exaggerating, but here she had heard it directly from the horse's mouth just how unqualified Debbie was to make these kinds of decisions. Not that it stopped her, of course.

“So after all that work I did of creating the job posting, collecting the applications, and rating and ranking them, the hiring manager decided I had to do them again. And again. And again.” Debbie made it sound as if the automated processes and few hours of reading were akin to building the Great Wall of China, which had been less successful at keeping outsiders out. “Lucky for you, no veterans bothered to apply this time around.”

Justine guessed correctly that in fact the veterans just started to smell a rigged process after a few repostings for the same position. The patriotic ones bowed out to stop

clogging the system. The greedy ones stopped too, but only because they realized it was a waste of their time.

“And you, just to let you know,” and to reemphasize Debbie’s importance as the high priestess of this process, “were particularly lucky that your Social ended with a three.”

Justine stared at her completely blankly. “What could that possibly have to do with anything?” she blurted out before being able to catch herself.

Debbie relished the confusion she was causing in this overeducated but naïve little girl. She continued her lesson. “Well as I said, we didn’t have any veterans apply this last time, but you were still one of four candidates who all scored nearly perfectly on the application assessment. Since the rule of three forced me to drop one of you from the cert, I had to resort to Appendix L in the Delegated Examining Operations Handbook to break the tie.”

“Appendix L?” Justine asked reflexively.

“Yes, the random number generator. In the event of a tie where all other possibilities have been exhausted, Appendix L has a list of random numbers for each tiebreaker that comes up during the year. This was the twelfth tiebreaker we’ve had and the random number for that slot was three. Since your Social Security Number ends with a three, you actually made the cut first. The poor man from Pennsylvania with the one had to be dropped. I’m sure he would have made an excellent employee.”

Justine could hardly believe what she was hearing. She had been an auditor for two years but had never descended into such depths of bureaucratic inanity before. This was starting to make Kafka seem like an optimist.

“However,” Debbie continued with a sigh, expressing her great disappointment at not being able to squash Justine’s application and show those executives that there were rules that needed to be followed, “you made it through to the top three and our hiring manager, DAD Johnson, has selected you for the position.”

“Well that’s a relief,” said Justine, although her tone didn’t disguise the fact that she was beginning to wonder if it really was a relief to make it through this process.

“But, there is one glitch,” Debbie was only too happy to inform her. “The job was listed as a GS-13 and while you did qualify for it based on the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities you wrote for the selective factors, technically you only qualify for a GS-9 based on your work history.”

“What?! But I was getting offers for twice that when I came out of grad school six years ago. Doesn’t that count for something?”

The General Schedule laid out the salary tables for all federal employees. The GS-13 level would have meant about \$85,000 a year with the DC cost of living adjustment. This was already well below what her classmates from Carnegie Mellon were earning, but Justine thought it was a sacrifice worth making for the good of the country. Besides, she didn’t really need the money. But as a GS-9 she’d only be at \$50,000 or so—she didn’t even know exactly because that was so far below her radar screen—and that was just too much to ask.

“I’m afraid a Master’s degree is only worth a GS-9, no matter where it’s from. Harvard, Stanford, DeVry—it doesn’t make a bit of difference to us. DAD Johnson told me that was unacceptable for you though,” Debbie did her best to make it sound like Justine was playing the part of a

spoiled princess for asking for fifteen percent less than she was worth. “So, that’s why I’ve called you in here; to see if we can work this out. Obviously, I didn’t want this on any e-mail records, which is why we had to do it face-to-face.”

“Do what exactly?” Justine forced out through clenched teeth.

“Well. In your KSAs and on your resume, you have some very specific descriptions of what you’ve done in the past.”

“Yes. I followed the STAR method—situation, timeline, action, results.”

“Mm-hmm. Well, they’re a little too specific if you understand what I mean. Like here for example.” Debbie pulled out a copy of Justine’s resume with big, handwritten notes in the margins that looked like they had come from a third-grader. “You say, you ‘Led the redesign and data transfer of a medical database with fifteen fields and 3.5 million records resulting in a modernized system compatible with organization’s new architecture.’ Would you say that was a complex project that you led, or a very complex project?”

Justine looked at her, baffled by the undefined distinction. “I guess I would say that was a very complex project. I mean, there were...”

“No, no,” Debbie cut her off, “that’s good enough, I don’t need to know all those details. The grade classifications just stipulate the degree of difficulty that the applicant has performed in their prior careers. ‘Very complex’ is the kind of thing that we need to see in order to get your work experience graded out to the thirteen level. So, do you think you can go home and re-do some of your resume and make it, you know, a little more vague?”

Justine went home and did what she needed to do. Sometimes the simplest tasks are the most heroic. So far in her DC career, she had met really smart people who were great fits for their jobs and wouldn't be anywhere else. Debbie was someone, however, who obviously couldn't be anywhere else.

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