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3920 words

## A DOOR LEFT OPEN

Lenny Klein was five and a half feet tall and sixty years old. He had come to Roger Sherman University fifteen years ago as the new chair of its computer science department. Shortly after arriving, he had attended the retirement dinner of an RSU professor.

He was asked to say a few words. Having nothing prepared, he started out with what had been occupying his mind for the last decade.

Klein had a sagging, liver-spotted face, which complemented his raspy, high-pitched voice. His words produced the slightest twinge in his gut when they left his mouth.

“As I stand here tonight,” he said, “I’m reminded of how much I’m looking forward to my own retirement.”

Fifteen years on, those indiscreet words had yet to come back to him. Not once---not even in third- or fourth-hand gossip---had they reappeared. It was as if he had changed places with an alternate Lenny Klein in a parallel universe, where the words had never been spoken.

After four years as chair he had stepped down and become an ordinary professor. But he still retained two of the chairman's perks: a six-figure salary and a second office. The office was on the third floor of a remodeled Victorian mansion that was shared with art, psychology, economics, and women's studies. It had a bare hardwood floor, a steel desk, empty bookshelves, a telephone, and a computer. Once, after being out of the country for three weeks, Klein had returned and found a stranger sitting at his desk. The man was a visitor in the art department whom somebody had let in (all the keys opened all the doors). It had taken less than ten minutes to straighten everything out. The visitor and his host complimented Klein for the grace with which he endured the mix-up and implied slight.

Klein had been pleased to discover how anonymous his hiding place could be.

But he could not go there today. At three o'clock he and Stu Murphy were to meet with the president of Roger Sherman University, to fish for support for the dean of the engineering college.

When Klein reached his office in the computer science building, he found emails from: the dean, reminding him of the three o'clock meeting; Murphy, asking if he had seen the dean's memo; and somebody named Torino.

Reading, Klein learned that Torino worked for the university counsel. RSU was being sued by a woman who had been denied a job in the sociology department. The university had to show all of its records on searches and hires for the past six years to the woman's lawyer, a federal judge, and (because she was black) an official of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. Computer Science had sent over copies of its documents at the end of the summer, two months ago. Torino wanted to talk to Klein about something he had found in them.

That had to be a mistake: Klein had served on no search committees. He wrote back, suggesting that Torino contact the current department chair.

Torino replied at once: "I'm a friend of Larry Trask."

Klein was thinking of how to respond when the telephone rang.

"Lenny Klein."

"This is Andy Torino."

"I was just about to send you an answer."

"You're seeing President Leghorn at three, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Can you be here at four?"

"I think four is a good time."

"Four, then."

When Klein and Murphy started across the common, the air carried the barest premonition of winter. Freshly fallen yellow leaves lay on the grass. Five students in T-shirts and cut-offs stood at the points of an invisible star and hurled a Frisbee across the gold-patched field.

Stu Murphy had a full beard and a high forehead. They gave him a rabbinical appearance. He seemed to be chewing something while he spoke.

"Marienbad ambushed us: it was as simple as that. In my thirty years of experience I would almost call his action unprecedented. There are ways to do things, and there are ways *not* to do them; and this was beyond the pale. *Well* beyond the pale."

"I couldn't agree more," said Klein.

"It's essential that we get to Leghorn before they do. This president has a habit of taking the first opinion he hears as definitive, no matter how biased, and after that nobody can change his mind."

"Abso-lute-ly."

Klein and Murphy had recruited the dean, William Donner, as their instrument for gaining control of the engineering college. Donner was an expert on groundwater contamination, and he often got called to consult ("testify") in lawsuits involving toxic waste. He earned upwards of a thousand dollars an hour for his sworn insights. During his three years as dean, Donner had spent less than fifty days on the RSU campus. Meanwhile, engineering enrollments had dropped, many offers of fat endowments had fallen through, and the board of trustees was threatening to dissolve the college.

Five days ago, at the monthly college meeting, an electrical engineer named Randall Marienbad had called for a vote of no-confidence against the dean. The motion had not been on the agenda, but three-quarters of the engineers---who were suspiciously and uncharacteristically present---had been ready to approve it. Only a procedural question---

of whether the dean had to be there---had enabled Klein and Murphy to get the vote delayed for a month.

Donner spent a lot of his time at toxic clean-up sites, directing the placement of test wells. If a collapsing derrick had crushed him, that would have been fine. But his name was linked with Klein and Murphy, and they did not want him fired. They needed the president to support Donner publicly.

They entered the president's outer office a few minutes before three.

"He's with somebody now," said the secretary. "If you'll please wait."

A minute later the inner door opened, and Randall Marienbad came out.

Some people said that Marienbad looked like Ed Harris and some said he looked like Clint Eastwood. Marienbad was sixty-two; his crew-cut hair was completely white. Every day he ran five miles and spent thirty minutes lifting weights---activities he frequently admitted to hating. As a Green Beret, decades ago, he had learned eleven ways of killing a man with his bare hands; and he had never got to use any of them.

"Well," he said, "if it isn't my two old friends. I take it you're here to speak up for our good buddy the dean. Let me give you a few pointers. Don't say anything you can't back up with hard data. Don't make promises you don't plan to keep. Oh, and there's another one: get the president to see the dean's *good* qualities."

Klein said, "Thanks for the pointers, Randy. We'll try to do that."

Klein and Murphy were told to go in.

RSU's last president had been physically driven from his office by a mob of wigged and body-painted animal-rights protesters. The Board of Trustees had lured his successor, Judd Leghorn, with promises of tighter security and a fourfold increase in pay.

Leghorn was compact and big-boned. (In college he had been a Division I linebacker.) He wore his steel-gray hair in a sloping, 1970s-style pompadour, which made him seem slightly shorter than he was. It also made him look immovable.

"Have a seat, gentlemen. I've just been talking with your nemesis." Leghorn was smiling.

"I would never want to call Marienbad our nemesis," said Klein, "though I will be the first to admit that we differ on many key issues."

The men took their seats.

"I think it's only fair to tell you," said Leghorn, "that I've already heard some persuasive arguments for the dean's ouster."

"We think such a decision is highly premature," said Klein. "You shouldn't let the opinion of one frustrated engineer sour you on one of the finest deans Roger Sherman University has ever known, bar none."

"Marienbad isn't the only one," said Leghorn. "And I've decided nothing."

"Who else has been here?" Murphy asked.

"That is none of your business."

"What Stu means is that the dean still has the support of a substantial majority of the college," said Klein. "Unfortunately, his supporters tend to be among the less politically active faculty. That is something I can personally sympathize with. I've always placed more value on good teaching and scholarship than on administrative matters."

"Tell me something," said Leghorn. "Where is Donner today?"

Klein and Murphy looked at each other.

“He’s in Massachusetts,” Leghorn said, “testifying in that Dante Foods case.”

“I remember him saying he might do that,” said Klein.

“He missed yesterday’s deans-and-chairs meeting---and the one before that.”

“Donner’s presence at the trial is giving us priceless publicity,” said Murphy.

“Absolutely priceless.”

“We wish he would be more ‘present’ here.”

“There is no question that the dean has many off-campus responsibilities,” said Klein.

“Nevertheless, his record of achievement is quite impressive, especially considering the short time he’s spent at RSU.”

“Short time: yes.”

“Now, that is exactly the attitude we’re fighting,” said Klein. “I happen to know that Donner has proposed several major initiatives for raising the caliber of the college, both in terms of teaching and research. These include the development of new synergistic relationships with industry and other colleges.”

“I’ve seen zero evidence of these.”

“Well, they take time, as you know. Many of his strategies are still being finalized.”

“But we can provide you with progress reports,” said Murphy.

“Forgive me for being skeptical,” said Leghorn. “Those meetings I mentioned. You know, Donner didn’t even bother to send substitutes.”

“That’s hardly fair,” said Klein. “The substitutes might have let him down.”

“I asked him. He said he hadn’t seen the need.”

Klein was the next person to speak.

“You have to admit, that shows honesty.”

“That’s not all it shows.”

“I can positively assure you that the dean meant no offense.”

“A cultural difference,” said Murphy. “I’m certain it was a cultural difference, nothing more.”

“We would like to know what your final intentions are,” said Klein.

“Final intentions? I have none. Personally, I think Donner should go. But the Board of Trustees doesn’t want to spend another three hundred thousand dollars right now looking for his replacement. Keeping Donner on as dean might be the lesser evil.”

Klein and Murphy left the president’s office. They passed through the building’s atrium, which was modeled after a Byzantine basilica. Mosaics in the domed ceiling showed scenes from the life of Roger Sherman.

At the exit, Klein suddenly stopped.

“Stu, I just remembered. I promised a student that I’d see somebody in Special Needs about getting her a tutor. You go on ahead.”

“See you back at the department.”

“Take care, Stu.”

The coffee bar in the basement was bright but windowless, and it was natural for it to be deserted on such a fine day. Klein spent the next half-hour sipping Lipton tea. Across the room, the only other customer, a blond student, was chatting online at one of the cafe’s computers. He wore a pale orange sweatshirt, blue jeans, and a backwards baseball cap. His hands rested on the keys, outwardly relaxed, but full of tense expectancy, like

those of a waiting sniper. He laughed, released a burst of keystrokes, and was silent for a few seconds: this rhythm continued for twenty minutes.

Suddenly he logged off, grabbed a green backpack, and rushed out.

Klein stared at the computer. After thirty seconds a cartoon of Roger Sherman (wearing a university sweatshirt) appeared on the screen and started to slowly carom off the sides. Sherman, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had also been a successful lawyer, and it was fitting that the artist had given him a contented expression.

The screen went black.

Immediately after hanging up on Torino, Klein had done a Web search for Larry Trask.

He was an assistant professor of computer science at South Dakota State University, Sioux Falls. The department's website gave a link to his homepage.

The beard was unfamiliar; it even had some gray in it.

Klein did a quick calculation: How old was Larry now?

No, Larry was not so old.

It was time to meet Torino.

The fluorescent lights in Torino's office sharpened some details and washed out others. The lawyer was younger and fatter than Klein had expected. His round face and slick-seeming hair made Klein think of a maitre d' in a 1940s movie.

"Thank you for coming, Professor Klein."

"I hate being called that. It's Lenny."

Torino's desk was not a standard Steelcase, but made of walnut. It had a gleaming glass top. The two men faced each other across it. A manila folder lay on the blotting pad in front of Torino.

"I've been going over the files. And I found this one, from Computer Science."

"Is that Larry's?"

"Let me finish," said Torino. "Larry and I grew up together."

"I hope you still keep in touch."

"We do."

Klein pointed to the folder. "May I?"

Torino pushed it across and Klein opened it.

"Larry told me about the thesis he wrote with you, the one that got him that award."

"His senior honors thesis. I remember. And *he* wrote it. I just offered a few pointers. Boy, that was a long time ago."

"He told me how proud he was when you agreed to do it."

"Students like Larry are one in a million."

"I guess you know that he got his PhD."

"At Illinois. And a post-doc at Brown."

"Dartmouth."

"A feather in his cap, either way."

"He took a lectureship at the University of Arizona, and another one at a small college in Idaho. That was about when the job market tightened up. He taught junior college for a year. He hated that. Last year he finally got onto tenure track, at South Dakota State."

"South Dakota State, Sioux Falls?"

“Yes.”

“I hear that's a good school.”

“When his post-doc was ending,” said Torino, “he applied for a job at RSU. He listed you as a reference.”

“Yes, I remember that.”

“His other three references wrote letters for him, but you didn't.”

Klein had spent most of the day thinking of how to respond to this.

“What do you mean?”

“It's not in the file,” said Torino, holding up his hand. “Wait. Let me finish. I contacted the chair of that year's search committee. He remembers asking you---twice---to write the letter.”

“Yes, I remember that now.”

“So, you didn't write it.”

“May I say something?”

“Speak.”

“Larry had his heart set on coming here to work with me, but at that time my administrative duties took up so much time that I couldn't have been a good colleague for him at all. He would have been completely isolated, which is a catastrophe for a young person starting out in academics.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“Tell him what?”

“You could have told him not to apply to RSU.”

“I didn't see why he shouldn't apply.”

“But the department couldn't interview him until his file was complete.”

“Yes, I suppose that's true.”

“I found this gap in the file weeks ago. I didn't know what to do about it then.”

Klein nodded.

“Now I do.”

“Before you say another word,” said Klein, “I should let you know: I'm not rich.”

“I don't want money.”

“But I assume you do want something.”

“Yes, I do,” Torino said. “You're going to apologize to Larry.”

“But that could be difficult.”

“It will be more difficult if you don't. Right now, I could recuse myself from the affirmative action case, citing close personal involvement. If I did, the university counsel would hear my reasons. He'd pass them on to the president.”

“I didn't know it worked that way.”

“It works that way,” said Torino. “Larry and I still keep in touch. Ten days from now I'm going to call him. If he's forgiven you, I'll stay on the case.”

“But Larry doesn't even know what I did.”

Klein knocked on the doorjamb. Murphy looked up.

“You busy?”

“Let me save these files.”

“Do you mind if I shut the door?”

“Go right ahead.”

A hemispherical swiveling chair---the kind that rose out of floors in the headquarters of international crime organizations---stood next to the door and was turned toward Murphy. Klein sat in it. He watched Murphy close a dozen overlapping windows of code.

“Stu, yesterday I had a meeting with Andy Torino.”

“Torino works in the counsel's office.”

“We talked about a search committee you chaired.”

“Yes?”

“He said you told him about asking me to write a letter.”

Murphy faced him.

“That's right.”

“What did you tell him?”

“What is this in regards to?”

“What did you tell him?”

“I'm not current on the precise protocols of disclosure.”

“I already know what you told him,” Klein said.

“I hope you're not accusing me of violating a confidence.”

“Now he wants me to write to Larry Trask and apologize.”

“Did he say that?”

“Yes, he did. If I don't, he'll recuse himself from the big affirmative action case, and Leghorn will learn everything.”

“Everybody on the committee knew about that letter.”

A few seconds passed.

“Torino must have given you a time limit,” said Murphy.

“He did. He gave me ten days.”

“That's very generous. *More* than enough time for you to write an adequate apology.”

One evening, about a week later, Klein unexpectedly found himself standing outside, next to his Camry. He did not remember leaving the office or putting on his coat.

He looked toward the Victorian mansion. His office light was on, and it was the only one.

He returned to the empty building. He walked up the grand staircase. He went slowly and quietly.

His door was open. The computer was humming. The monitor had gone dark.

Klein jiggled the mouse. A static-electric snap sounded inside the machine.

The letter faded in---

*Five years ago, when you were applying for a job at Roger Sherman University, I agreed to write you a letter of recommendation. I am writing to you now to ask for your forgiveness, because I never wrote that letter.*

*My reasons for not writing it were complex, but chiefly I was afraid that, if you came to RSU as a colleague, you would learn that I am not much of a scholar, but that I devote most of my time to academic politics.*

*Academic politics, and not conscience, is why I am writing to you now.*

*In a few weeks a vital issue in the engineering college will be decided. Tomorrow or the day after, your friend, Andrew Torino, will call and ask if I have apologized to you and if you have forgiven me. If you do not forgive me, Torino will see to it that the president learns what I did to you, and we will probably lose all hope of support from that quarter.*

*I know something of what your life has been like since leaving RSU. I must bear some of the responsibility for its disappointments.*

*If it is any consolation, you should know that, at my first job, at Kansas State, I failed to make tenure.*

*Now I only ask for your mercy.*

He remembered the struggle to write it, and the feeling of redemption it had given him. For a few days, the life he had lived had seemed to disappear, leaving only a malleable future. A click of the mouse would send out the letter, like Noah's dove.

He deleted it.

“You've reached the voicemail of Larry Trask. I'm not in the office right now, but if you leave your name, number, and a brief message, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. If you're calling about the review session, it begins at five on Friday in room one-eleven, Weston Hall.”

“Hello, Larry, you probably don't remember me. This is your old professor Lenny Klein, from Roger Sherman University. I had something I wanted to ask you, but I thought it would be better to do it over the phone than by email.

“How are you doing? You can call me back.” Klein gave his number. “Maybe I'll try again later. It was good to hear your voice. Take care.”

The phone rang at four-ten.

“This is Larry Trask.”

“Larry, it's good to hear from you. How're things in South Dakota? We old folks get so set in our ways: you know how it is. There haven't been many changes around here.”

“There really isn't that much to tell,” said Trask.

“But I'm sure there must be something.”

“What'd you call for?”

“I called because of something I wanted to talk to you about. You remember how, years ago, you applied for a job at RSU.”

“I remember.”

“I promised to write you a letter.”

“I also remember that,” said Trask.

“Well, I thought you would.”

“What did you want to tell me?”

“I wanted to tell you---I mean I have to tell you---that I didn't write you that letter, which I know was the wrong thing to do.”

Trask said nothing.

“Larry?”

“I knew that.”

“Larry?”

“I knew that. A guy on the committee told me.”

“He shouldn't have done that.”

“He was really pissed at you,” said Trask. “He said the reason you didn't write the letter was because you were a lazy washed-up son of a bitch, and you didn't want me to find out.”

“My reasons for not writing the letter are a little too complex to explain over the phone.”

Trask said nothing.

“Larry, I really want to apologize. If I wasn't going to write the letter, I should have told you at the time. I want you to know that I take full responsibility for what I did.”

“What does ‘full responsibility’ mean?”

“Well, I think we both know what full responsibility means.”

“Good,” said Trask. “I think you should cut off your dick.”

“Excuse me?”

“Cut off your dick. That’s how I interpret full responsibility.”

“I don’t think you really mean that.”

“If I’d gone to RSU, I’d have tenure now.”

“That may be true.”

“Can you get me tenure---now?”

“You know I can’t just do that,” said Klein. “Is that why you thought I called, to offer you a job?”

“I don’t know what I thought.”

“Larry, the only reason I called is because it’s the right thing to do. Frankly, my failure has been bothering me for years. I'm sorry that you're so very angry with me. It isn't good to stay angry. Life is too short.”

“It sure is.”

“I hope we can continue to be friends.”

“Cut off your dick.”

Trask hung up.

Klein returned the receiver to its cradle.

Lenny Klein walked downstairs, to the only men's restroom in the mansion. He sat on the toilet for ten minutes, while nothing came out.

He gave his hands a thorough washing.

Three weeks later, the dean was fired. Two weeks after that, the college held a party to welcome the interim dean, a prominent Hittitologist. Klein was asked to cut the cake. (Donner was away, still testifying against Dante Foods.)

The silver-plated knife had a pointed, leaf-shaped blade that was over a foot long. Randall Marienbad joked that they were being pretty brave, handing a weapon like that to their good friend Professor Klein.

Klein laughed, and he prepared to slice off the first piece.