

OMG

Professor Wainright, dead. It was still sinking in.

Tom walked along the musty hallowed halls of King's University's Administrative Services, which was located in one of the many limestone buildings on campus. He was on his way to meet the President of the university. It had been two weeks since the Professor's death and this was the first official meeting to discuss the research group's future.

There had been an uneasy silence from the university about the group's future; plenty of platitudes about Professor Wainright's career, the expected sympathetic social media messaging, flowers sent to the Life Research Group and flags flying half-mast, but nothing about 'what next'.

Professor Wainright had been Tom's mentor for the past seven years. First, as his supervisor for his doctoral degree, and then as his boss, doing what the Professor had stated was ground-breaking research. Thanks to an initial funding grant from the federal government they had amassed five researchers, an administrator and an information technology / data specialist over the past three years in the LRG. As Associate Director, Tom was well on the way to having a successful academic career.

But more importantly for Tom was his relationship with Eloise. She was much more driven than Tom; some would say she was obsessive in her pursuit of a hugely successful academic career. While the academic life was fine for Tom, his real passions were to make Eloise's academic aspirations come true, and for the two of them to spend their lives together. Professor Wainright's sudden death had not been part of Tom's longer-term vision for his life, or Eloise's life for that matter.

So Tom was nervous as he walked to the President's office, a feeling compounded by the fact that he had never been privy to the financial details of the research group. The only person who had complete access to the group's finances was dead. Professor Wainright had always insisted that he managed the funds so that others were free to focus on the vitally important research function. Tom liked the

idea of ignoring anything to do with money, but he was now regretting his long-standing distancing from all matters financial.

He pushed open the creaky eight-foot high one-hundred and fifty-year old oak door to the outer chamber of the President's office. Glenis Birtles sat at her mahogany desk, tilted her head forward to look over her horn-rimmed glasses at him, and nodded to the coffee table and seating on the left, where Tom proceeded to walk and pick up the latest edition of the journal *Bioethics*. He sat down on the leather couch, exhaling the sound of a fart from it as he moved around on its soft circa-1750 leather. Likely one of thousands of fart sounds over the past two hundred and seventy years that had brought laughter and embarrassment to many sitters.

He started to giggle, but quickly stopped when Glenis scornfully directed piercing eyes his way, no doubt having experienced this fart moment hundreds of times before.

With thirty-seven years of service to the university and an acute sense of importance of all matters, Glenis protected the President's time and space as if she were a twenty-year Navy Seal veteran, but a bit more menacing. Tom was tempted to ask if she remembered the day the door was first put in, just to break the ice, but he knew he would come across as a smart-ass. Instead he gave her his best smile and mouthed a gentle thank-you in her direction. He had a funny suspicion he needed more friends in the university than he had at this moment.

Bioethics was no page-turner, so he spent five minutes gazing at portraits of past presidents hanging on the walls, thinking how stuck-up they all looked. He was almost falling asleep on the couch when Glenis quietly informed him the President was ready to see him.

'You have ten minutes,' she said as he walked into the President's office.

'Well I better walk twice as fast and talk quickly,' he replied, smiling.

Behind the massive desk sat a massive balding man with slight tufts of white hair on the sides of his head and at the back. Tom thought the President looked long overdue for a serious diet and lessons on high cholesterol, blood pressure and moderate drinking. The President rose out of his chair and came around from behind his desk to greet Tom with a huge smile and mitts that a grizzly bear would be proud of.

‘Sit down, sit down my old boy, how the hell are you doing?’ he said with a Welsh accent that he had not shaken off, and in fact, had worked hard at keeping, since he first came to Canada thirty years ago. Tom still had his own easily identifiable English accent even though he had been living in Canada for fifteen years. But he had no desire or need to cultivate it and keep it fresh.

He sat down on the leather seat across from the President. Between them was a coffee table scattered with academic journals, a silver decanter of water and two crystal glasses.

‘Dreadful thing, that Wainright incident, good grief. Threw us all for a spin or two. Never knew him that well, mind you, but he seemed to know what he was talking about. Can’t always guarantee that at the university these days, can you, Tom.’

Tom started to laugh because he thought that was to be expected. The President stared back at him curiously. There were no smiles or laughter in response; Tom realized the President was serious.

‘Anyway,’ boomed the President again, ‘enough of the chit-chat, let’s get down to business.’

Tom placed his hands between his legs and nodded his head slowly. He was nervous. The President flipped through a couple of pages, which from Tom’s angle, looked like financial statements.

Silence.

Tom’s heart started racing. This was it; the future was about to begin. He reached over, poured a glass of water and had a drink. He sat in silence for five hours ... well, alright, several very long seconds ... waiting for the President to continue.

‘Hmmm, how do I say this ... Yes ... well Tom ... hmmm ... well your research group is broke. Out of money. Zippo. Bankrupt. Or rather, it will be in four months.’

The water in Tom’s mouth spontaneously swirled uncontrollably, looking for a way out as he choked his way through the next few seconds – mouth, nose ... it didn’t matter.

‘I’m sorry,’ Tom spluttered, as he leaned forward coughing and wiping his face, ‘you said broke, I’m not sure what you mean.’

'Broke! As in no money, dear boy. Unless you're sitting on a pile of buried treasure you're up shits creek without a paddle, as it were.'

'What!?' exclaimed Tom, a bit louder than he intended. He was stunned and terribly confused. 'I mean, how come? We don't really spend much.'

'Well, apparently you do. Your esteemed but now dead Director it seems, spent most of it over the past two years. Let's see. Hmmm ...' he said as he frowned and tipped his head forward so he could look over his glasses. 'Well as I look at these figures, well over half of all your funding last year was spent on travel to Africa and related sundry expenses such as interpreters and guides and food and entertainment and the like.'

The President dropped the Wainright dossier on the coffee table, leaned back in his chair and cupped his hands together behind his head. His rotund stomach strained the buttons on his white dress shirt; Tom felt himself preparing to duck, in case the buttons pinged off from the pressure.

Africa!? thought Tom, sitting motionless. Wainright never said he went to Africa. Ever.

'My boy, this is not the sort of thing the university condones, or at least is willing to explain to the general public or the government. Your boss, it seems, was a master of codes and claims and burying expenses in multiple budget lines. It appears he was funding something that was not approved to be funded. God knows what it was, but it's left you, me, the university – the research group – all quite in the lurch. Unless you sort this mess out and get more funding you've got about four months at most, and then you're all, well, gone – the university will not fund a cent more on your life group. What the hell does Life Research Group mean, anyway?!

It was a fair question, one that had plagued the LRG since its inception three years earlier. On the one hand the ambiguity and generality of the name gave the research group an enormous amount of freedom to do what it wanted. On the other hand, it was so general it put off many potential private funders who were concerned that for all they knew they might be funding terrorists.

Africa? Tom's heart sunk to a new level, squirming just under rock bottom.

Before Tom could even attempt an answer, the President looked at his watch and sighed. 'Well, best of British, Tom.' He used the arms of the chair to push his body up, and held his hand out as a guide for Tom to go to the door, as opposed to

Tom finding it himself. The President had made his point, and there was no sense wasting any more of his time. He was very clear. It was Tom's problem, not the University's. And finishing now would give him five minutes to check Snapchat on his phone before the next meeting.

He ushered Tom out with a totally insincere smile, slapping his grizzly paw on Tom's back, and wishing him the world's best luck again. Glenis would see him out. The meeting was over.

And so it was left to the now worrying Acting Director of the now worryingly titled Life Research Group to do something with the now worrying news.

'Oh and Tom,' the President called out. 'One last thing. This is between you and I for now, understand? This is not the sort of thing the university or anyone else needs to know. But I suggest you think seriously about your future as soon as you can. And get moving on it.'

Tom could hear himself thanking the President for his time and thoughts, but his mind was in a cloud. Get moving on his future? Holy Shit. Everything seemed quite surreal. Wainright, his mentor, dead. Wainright, a thief. Wainright, a liar.

Wainright. A right bastard.