

## **Roundtable**

The members of Life Research Group waited patiently for Tom in their meeting room on the fourth floor of the Adams Building. They were seated around a massive, round oak table, meant to emphasize the equality of each person in the LRG. The chairs around the table were also made of heavy oak; the standing joke was that one condition of being employed in the LRG was that you must have the strength to pull the chairs in and out at least twice in a one-hour period.

The roundtable and chairs dominated the meeting room, which overlooked the stone landscaped courtyard immediately below. Beyond that, a swath of one-hundred-year-old maple trees stood on the slope of a gentle hill that led up to the football field and tennis courts.

The sun was shining into the meeting room, requiring the venetian blinds to be angled slightly. It was hot and the air conditioning had been turned off since this was now autumn. There was a whiteboard on the side wall and a blackboard at the front of the room. A noticeboard with nothing on it except pins, likely placed there in the 1950s, hung on the back wall of the room and beside that was a clock from around the same era. There was once a poster on the side wall that celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the university but it had been defaced by bored students, or possibly bored faculty members, so it had been removed to eliminate any further temptation to deface it completely. A metal garbage can beside the door completed the austere look.

There was no ‘head’ of the table where the Boss sat. This was traced back to King Arthur and his knights of the roundtable in the late fifth to early sixth century. The LRG’s roundtable certainly was not new when they got it, but definitely not that old. It was in fact the only large table available at the university’s used furniture storage warehouse when the LRG was created. But the message of equality was still important, nonetheless.

A flat organizational structure with a roundtable – that was the LRG. That’s how John Wainright liked it. He was the Director for sure, but not aloof or arrogant like many academics and always happy to help out, which, for a time, included pitching in to clean the kitchen and make the coffee whenever there was none, or if it was a day or two old. These simple acts endeared him to the LRG staff.

As did his absent-mindedness. One day he made a large pot of coffee but forgot to put the pot under the percolator; the countertop, cutlery drawers and floor were awash with Starbucks Italian Roast. Over time, the thrill of the Director making coffee for everyone shifted to fear each time he wandered into the kitchen.

There were also stories – legends – of him driving to a conference for two hours before realizing the conference he was to be attending was in the opposite direction. He once took his grandson for a lovely walk around the streets in his stroller, a walk that ended abruptly when he looked in the stroller and realized he had forgot to put his grandson in it. On another occasion he tripped on his own luggage at the bottom of an escalator at the Airport's arrival floor, resulting in six other passengers behind the professor falling over with him with numerous pieces of luggage breaking open and causing chaos all around.

Professor Wainright was not sitting at the LRG's roundtable today, being dead ranking as one of the more unique and indisputable legitimate reasons for missing a meeting. Here, stepping into Wainright's shoes as Acting Director, was a more youthful, and in fact alive, but late and horribly hungover, Tom Carrott.

Tom walked into the dull, lifeless meeting room with the spectacular view and headed to his usual seat at the roundtable. He noticed a seat was missing. 'Christ,' he said to the other "Lifers," as they liked to be known, 'don't tell me Wainright's chair died as well.'

You could hear a pin drop. Bizarrely, a pin dropped out of the noticeboard at precisely this moment. Everyone waited in silence for another pin to drop. It didn't. 'Wow,' said Peggy, the Administrative Assistant, 'that's like having a rainbow land on your flippin' head, ain't it.'

*Thank god*, thought Tom; having an epic fail with his joke was not a good way to start the meeting. You could always rely on Peggy for weird comments.

'Well anyways,' he added, shuffling some papers on the table as he sat down, 'thanks everyone for coming to this meeting.'

'You told us we had to come, that it was compulsory or we'd lose our jobs,' said Warren the forty-year old balding, overweight and recently divorced data analyst.

'Ah, well, sure,' replied Tom, 'that's one way of looking at it Warren, thanks for that, but I didn't think anyone would take it seriously ... you're all here though, and that's the main thing. I've got some news that affects us all.'

Eloise squirmed a little in her seat, looking around the table for any signs of angst from the Lifers. There wasn't any. Most likely because Wainright never ever, for a second, gave any hint of funding being a problem. For all they knew they were permanent employees of the university and would be working there until they died. Wainright's philosophy was that his staff should be happy, which to him was the secret of a healthy, productive workplace.

*This is going to be hard*, thought Tom, knowing full well that the first time he'd try to give them the news they wouldn't believe him and would laugh.

'I'm not sure how to say this folks, so I'll say it as simply as I can.' He paused, glanced over at Eloise, and took a deep breath. 'The University President told me yesterday that we – us' – he gestured outwardly with his hands, 'the Life Group, have only four months of funding left, at which time we will all lose our jobs – all of us – and the group will no longer exist.'

Silence.

Tom looked briefly at each of the Lifers, nodding with a strained smile as he did, as if to say, yes that's right you heard me. Furtive Lifer eyes looked around at one another. And then it happened.

With the exception of Tom and Eloise the room erupted with laughter and tears. It was so utterly wonderful, spontaneous and infectious that Tom and even Eloise were soon laughing as well, although they weren't sure why.

Eventually the laughter subsided, the tears were wiped away, and there was the odd groan interspersed with noses being blown. All eyes refocused now on Tom. Tom, still playing along, wiped his eyes for effect, looked around, smiled, and tried again.

'I really wish I was joking, but I'm not.'

'He's really not,' popped out Eloise, no longer smiling, her voice tense. She added, 'Wainright's left us almost broke ... and ... anyway ... carry on Tom.'

'Ah, well ... yes, that's right. Thanks El. It's true. And the university has no intention of bailing us out either. It's over to us – all of us – to dig out of this hole.'

Tom looked around. It was awkwardly quiet; a very somber mood had quickly set in. *Everyone's thinking this through*, he thought, rightly concerned about their own lives now.

There was Eloise, of course. He hadn't had a chance to talk to her since the night before, so he wasn't sure what she was thinking. Then there was Angie (or Ange as she was often called), to her right, the group's IT computer expert in her mid-twenties who could make anything on a computer possible but who was so socially awkward she struggled to have a coherent conversation with anyone in person. Next to her was Stuart, or 'McStu' as they called him, the newly minted post-graduate fellow from Scotland who no-one understood when he talked, but who seemed to have a talent for getting a new girlfriend almost weekly. And beside McStu sat Li Yan, an older Chinese researcher working on contract full-time with the LRG who had a better command of the English language than anyone else in the room. Warren sat beside Li Yan, looking down at the table or perhaps his shoes, most likely in shock, possibly in tears.

'Now the good news, or at least I think this is good news: I've been in discussions with someone who would be ideal for the Group – a research consultant who is going to help us get out of this mess.' Eloise raised her eyebrows and stared at Tom; this was news to her. 'The really good news,' continued Tom, 'is that he's willing to work with us, without pay, until we turn things around. I guess the consulting world is pretty lucrative if you're good at it.'

Eloise's now-bulging eyes conveyed total surprise, which didn't go unnoticed by the other Lifers.

'Why would he do that?' asked Ange.

'Money doesn't seem to be the issue. What he really wants, he says, is a permanent, tenured university position, and although I couldn't promise him that, we both figured that if he played a big hand in bailing us out and brought in lots of funding, the university would be thrilled to have him here. So he's going to work with us, generate funding, write reports, do some media stuff – you name it.'

'Does he have a name, or shall we call him the White Knight of the Roundtable?' quipped McStu.

Tom stumbled, mentally kicking himself in the groin for not having thought of this earlier, like five hours ago when the fictitious researcher idea first occurred to him. 'Ah .... Yes .... His name is Bill,' he said. 'Bill Smith.'

There was weary silence. ‘Awesome,’ said Ange finally. ‘Well done Tom then aye, getting right onto it.’ The Lifers nodded their heads, although everyone knew that a new researcher in itself was not going to be a successful single bullet solution. Eloise, however, was seething mad – furious with Tom for not having said anything to her about this Bill Smith news.

The LRG talked for a few more minutes about mundane matters such as what reports were being written, whose turn it was to buy coffee, changing office hours, orders for office supplies, that sort of thing. Tom barely spoke again which was fine by him, but he couldn’t help think that everything seemed like business as usual. For sure, they would all be thinking of the future, but at this point having Bill Smith riding in as the White Knight seemed to offer everyone some hope.

And he had also managed to set things up for his burgeoning plan to unfold. He smiled a somewhat goofy smile to no-one in particular. Eloise wouldn’t look at him. Something clearly wasn’t right. Of course, he only now realized that he had not discussed Bill Smith with her. Tom felt like a jerk. Shit. What was she thinking?

## **The CIA**

Langley is not known for much else other than it being the home of the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. It’s in McLean, Virginia; a suburb, really, for Washington D.C. about a 20-minute drive away. McLean has a population of 50,000, most of whom live in luxury homes, reflecting its status as the wealthiest zip code area in and around Washington DC.

The Starbucks at Tysons Corners has an amazing DC Sweet Potato Cake, with pecan cream cheese frosting. Which is why Pete, the tall thin spook in his early fifties with a shaven head wearing a dark blue suit – the CIA Director of Intelligence and Foreign Affairs – asked his long time colleague – Charlie, the short chubby spook with wild red hair wearing a flannel shirt and corduroy trousers – the Associate Director in the CIA’s Office of Strategic Programs – to meet him there for coffee. And cake, of course. Pete also loved the aroma of a Starbucks store and the taste of his regular Red Eye, a strong bold coffee with a shot of espresso. Sometimes two shots, depending on the day.

Pete could have simply walked down the hall to see his short chubby colleague in his office but the topic of conversation was one that danced on the fringe of

sanctioned work, which meant it was best to keep it away from big ears, suspicious eyes and minds, and of course, budget lines.

'Thanks for coming, Charlie,' said Pete.

'Hey, any time for you. Besides, being around spooks all day gives me the creeps, if you know what I mean.' They both laughed; it was a decades-old joke between the two men who had known each other since the academy when they first joined the CIA thirty years earlier.

Fortunately, it was late morning and quiet in the Starbucks; they were able to find a spot with no-one close by to eavesdrop on their conversation.

'What's up?' continued Charlie, who was now almost salivating as he got set to tuck into his cake while the two men got comfortable in their leather chairs. They each had a sip of coffee. 'It's our old friend Wainright. He's back. I think we need to reopen that file.'

'Wainright? THE Wainright? Wainright's back?! What do you mean? I thought that mess was dealt with years ago.'

'So did I,' said Pete as he inhaled the rich caffeine from the top of his paper cup, closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and smiled. 'We'll have to do something, you know that, right?'

'I don't see we have a choice,' replied Charlie, as he threw himself into his cake.

'Let's face it, Wainright was an embarrassment to us and the Agency twenty years ago; especially us, because we believed him. What a Con! And if he's back pulling shit like that now he needs to be taken care of. So what's he doing then, exactly?'

'Right now, very little ... because he's dead. Apparently he collapsed as he was giving a lecture at some conference. They say it was his heart, but – well, you know, nothing's ever really certain in this world, is it?'

'Not in our world at least!' They both laughed. 'Wow. So if he's dead,' said Charlie, 'why should we care? Game over, really, isn't it?'

'The game may just be starting, I'm afraid. About a month ago our Egyptian intel picked up Wainright out of the blue through another piece of surveillance work. He was in Cairo. Seems he had some meetings with people we weren't able to identify, and he was apparently quite adept at losing our guys who were watching

him. Like he knew he was being followed. All very suspicious for someone who wouldn't have anything to hide. A few days after arriving back he dies suddenly. Maybe it's a bit of the 24/7 Spook in me, but I did some of my own digging and discovered that he travelled to Africa a lot over the past two years.'

'So why would he be doing that?'

'Exactly. I can only think that he's discovered something new, and this time is keeping it to himself instead of coming to us. Bastard.'

'Or passing it on to others.'

'Jesus, Charlie, you're more paranoid than me ... but yes, exactly.'

'You can hardly blame him for not coming back to us after what we did to him... well, I mean what we did to his family.'

'National security remember, national security. We were just doing our jobs. And we still need to keep doing our jobs.'

'I suppose you're right. If he really does have those secrets, hell, even after all these years, they're still as important now as they were back then. Maybe more important.'

'Don't forget that back then those secrets led to three high level political assassinations, which we don't do, of course, and that small war, and our arses kicked around the halls of Langley like we were human pinatas. Not happening this time. We need to act on this.'

'Agreed. So, Pete, how about I mobilize one of my guys on this to get some more intel?'

'Yeah, let's do it. The place to start is Wainright's university. He led some sort of research group there and he must've had help from someone close to him. Start with his Associate Director, Tom Carrott.' He paused. 'Carrott? How the hell do you go through life as a Carrott?!'

Charlie nearly choked on his cake. He wiped the crumbs off his shirt as Pete looked around. 'Carrott,' they said in unison. Charlie shook his head. More crumbs fell as he contorted his mouth and teeth to look like a rabbit. They looked at each and giggled like schoolkids. National security could be fun at times.

## The Strategy Talk

‘Thanks for coming back again, guys, after yesterday’s little announcement on our future.’ Tom was still as nervous as he was when he first broke the budgetary news to the Life Research Group.

‘I thought, given the situation, and you know, we’re all in this together ... what do you – like all of you here – think we should do?’

He looked around the table only to see everyone looking at each other, looking down at the table, or the floor, or their nails, or their coffee, or the fresh donuts he’d brought in for the meeting, or the clock on the back wall, the ticking of which seemed to be getting louder and louder. The morning itself didn’t help; the skies were cloudy and a nippy breeze caught everyone by surprise – a clear reminder that in a few weeks winter would be upon them.

Tom, however, was more focused on the four-month deadline. He looked over to Eloise. They shrugged their shoulders at one another. At least there was a smile on her face, which pleased Tom, as they hadn’t talked since he unloaded the Bill Smith bombshell the day before. In retrospect he should’ve said something to her first. He knew it and he knew Eloise knew it. Hopefully she would cut him some slack. *What an idiot*, he thought, as he watched her checking her phone for messages. *I’ll make it up to her.*

‘You mean us?’ said Peggy, taken by surprise that her opinion actually mattered.

‘We’ve never done anything like this before, Tom,’ added Warren, ‘so why start now?’

‘Well for one, I – we’ – he looked at Eloise and paused, just long enough for everyone to see that he was looking at Eloise – ‘value your opinions. And second, desperate times call for desperate measures.’ He started to laugh but quickly regretted saying it. ‘I didn’t mean it like that, sorry. And, well, third, I think I’m still a bit drunk from two nights ago and the brain – this one,’ he pointed to his own head, ‘isn’t really synapsing very well.’ He smiled. ‘And then there’s the key point I suppose, that I haven’t been in this position before.’



*'A bit drunk from two nights ago' – why did I say that!* He couldn't look at Eloise after that comment. *She'd be rightly justified in wondering who I was drunk with, or did I drink by myself, and why, and how come she didn't know that either.*

'Yeah, that's right!' said Peggy. 'You're our leader now, you're our King Arthur.' McStu and Warren pulled their right hands to their hearts in unison and stood up as a sign of allegiance.

Tom grinned. 'I've never seen myself as an Arthur, let alone a King, but if that's what you want me to be and we get through all this, then so be it.' And with that he stood up, balanced a donut on his head as a crown and did a little jig for everyone. The donut fell to the floor; there were laughs from everyone except Eloise, although she couldn't help giggling quietly to herself.

Li Yan used her red sharpie to write King Tom on a *Post It* note and stuck it on her own donut. She walked around to Tom and ceremonially placed the donut on his head. The team started clapping and whistling. McStu and Warren got up and did a Highland fling, clasping their arms and twirling around.

'Where are the bagpipes when you need them!' shouted Ange.

And in those few moments there came a special bonding of the LRG. King Tom rose and bowed. This was a new beginning for the Life Research Group. 'From the ashes rises the Phoenix,' Tom exclaimed, as he stood up and raised his pen up to the light.

'Alright then!' he said. 'Give it to me. What are we going to do?'

After a pause, Peggy gave her five cents worth. 'This 'research' you do,' she said as she used her fingers to invert apostrophes, 'no offence like, but it's as boring as shit. Why don't you research something interesting? Something that me and Warren and Ange and everyone can understand ... you know ... even use.'

'Yeah that's right,' blurted Ange. 'You know we'd walk off the cliff for you and Eloise, but really, what's the big deal about what you do? I've worked here for two years and anytime someone asks what I do, and I try to tell them, I almost fall asleep myself because this research is so dull. I'm sure it's useful, but oh my god, I don't get it.'

Tom knew exactly what they meant. His own doctoral research was on the legal obligations of Canada's *Charter of Rights* to provide health promotion and illness and disease prevention, but it too would be seen by many as a nighttime

supplement to aid sleeping. And he could hardly tell them that in the grand scheme of his life interests, despite being quite good at it, he didn't really care about research. Nope. Not the sort of thing you want to hear from your Research Leader.

'Good points,' he said. 'And in fairness to me and Eloise and many others, we're doing work that helps inform policy decision-makers in the government and other researchers, and, well, you know, even more people when the research gets published.'

'But how does that make anyone's life better?' asked Peggy.

*Christ*, thought Tom, *this is like an oral exam*. Eloise, feeling attacked, entered into the fray. 'Tom's right, we do the research for the high-level decision-makers who use it to make policies and create new programs and services for people or improve existing ones.'

'Well sure,' replied Ange, 'that makes sense and all that, but don't you ever wonder if you're making a difference to people's actual lives?'

'That's right, Ange,' added Peggy. 'A plumber can come and fix my toilet after two days of it backing up and then 'viola', I can flush again! That makes a difference in my life. But you guys ... and no offence again, like ... show me you make a difference.'

*Oh god*, thought Tom, *the classic 'show me the difference you make' line*. The academic's dilemma, increasingly important these days where funding for research depends on being able to show some relevance to the real world. *Fair enough though, but that's not how universities are set up*.

'Okay, okay, great, we've got it. Enough for now about how worthless we are ... and Eloise and I thank-you hugely for that ... but what should we all be doing to get us out of this hole? And without being too crass about it, how do we bring in the cash, and soon? It's all our jobs on the line – all of us. So ... you know people ... have a say in your own destiny.'

'Drugs,' mumbled Warren as he looked around the table at his colleagues staring at him. 'Drugs.'

Silence.

'You know ... drugs!'

'Drrrruugs,' replied Tom slowly and curiously.

'Yeah, you know, if we're all about Life, what drugs should we take to make it better?'

Tom hesitated for a second. It was clear Warren had spent too much time working on large databases in the basement by himself, days on end. 'Ah okay, sure, that's one idea, a good idea ... others ...?'

'What's the top ten ways that'll make me live longer?'

'Oh go, Ange, that's it, cool,' added Peggy.

'I mean,' added Ange, 'if I like living why wouldn't I try to live longer? Or forever even! Can you tell me, like, right now, what the top ten things are?'

'Well that's quite complex actually, Ange,' said Eloise, '... it's a combination of ...'

'Bollocks!!' interjected Warren. 'It shouldn't be complex at all. It's not!' His face was turning red. 'Why can't you give me ten things I should do? And you know, fuck, what if I had tons of money, and believed you, and ... holy shit you could make these ten things work for me. Forget funding agencies and government grants and all that bullshit. Go get money from the real people who have the real money.'

'If, that is, you're good at what you do,' chimed in McStu.

Peggy was getting excited now. 'And you get it out there,' pointing out the window. 'Forget publishing papers and crap. Use social media, TV talk shows, newspapers ... get in front of Warren's real people, get them seeing real stuff, good stuff, that you can give them. The world is such a screwed-up place right now, people want ways to make their own lives better. Don't we all want that?'

'Right on,' added Ange, 'and you're easy on the eyes Tom, you know ... and you too Eloise. Geez you guys, men and women will gawk and listen and melt in front of you.'

Eloise started to blush. Warren stood up and started to do his trademark sexy dance, gyrating behind his chair.

'Get the friggin' beast seated!' yelled McStu. Everyone was howling and clapping now. Tom was feeling alive again.

'So ...' he said, 'okay, I get it ... be more sexy, like Dirty-Dancing-Warren-the-Beast there, that's going to be our secret weapon, our solution, our salvation, then?'

'You gotta get out there, Man!' said McStu emphatically. 'Y'know, with that sexy little English accent you've got going, gals love that stuff. And you as well, Eloise, you've got to get out there too!' Everyone nodded in agreement.

Tom smiled for a couple of seconds. 'Ah, alright ... so that's good, I think I've got it.' Tom looked over to Eloise, who was looking increasingly uncomfortable with it all. It was *too much* fun for her perhaps, thought Tom, a bit unfairly.

Eloise looked back to Tom. 'God, Tom, is that it? You'll start swinging your academic handbag on the street corners for anyone who will give you a quick buck?' It was a funny comment but the look in Eloise's eyes suggested it wasn't meant to be as funny as everyone thought. She was serious. Tom knew it. Everyone in the LRG liked Tom and Eloise and they saw the tension between them at this very moment, a rift-making boyfriend-girlfriend-like tension that no one had seen from the two of them before.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

'Did you say *Buck*?' spluttered Warren.

New giggles bubbled up and quickly turned into laughter, from Tom too.

Eloise didn't smile. She rose sharply from her seat without making eye contact with anyone, gathered her notebook and phone, and walked briskly out of the meeting room.