

ONE

Every one of the 37 men on State's law faculty was in thrall to Dean Elspeth Flowers, from George Cruikshank, who was well into his seventies, to young Benjamin Hubbell, the dean's most recent and brilliant hire. For the gay Bucholz twins, Garry and Larry, the dean's Galliano fashions and carmine-painted nails were a bright beacon against the austere New England horizon. If the faculty's seven women were somewhat less rapturous, they were nonetheless in craven debt to Elspeth for protecting their five-hour workweeks and four-month summer holidays against the overwhelmingly male legislature's insisting question: What do these professors *do* with the rest of their time?

But Elspeth feared that she was losing her powers. All men are really 11-year-old boys, as riveted by a girl's curves today as when they were adolescents, and Elspeth knew that if she let her wondrous glow dim for even a moment these boys would abandon her like a worn-out catcher's mitt. Just this morning, a United States senator who ordinarily jumped at her smallest demand kept Elspeth waiting for two hours, causing her to miss the noon flight home and making her late for her meeting with University President Rawleigh Bartles.

And when on the ride to the airport she called the usually submissive president to persuade him to postpone their budget meeting until Monday, Rawleigh demurred. "You're not the only person on my calendar, Ellie. I already made one exception, letting you plead your case on Sunday, of all days. I'm not going to make another."

The wooded New England landscape sped by outside her car window as Elspeth struggled to reassure herself that the senator's delay and the president's intransigence were only small lapses. She would prevail in her budget requests, even though it would require her to reverse in Rawleigh's mind the trammeling force of the university's history. Founded in 1871 as an agricultural college, State's academic embrace had, in the educational heyday of the 1950s, been broadened by a politically ambitious governor and a compliant legislature to take in not only the social sciences and the humanities, but the professions as well. Yet origins persist, particularly in the barnyard, and even today the Food Science Department and the Meat Lab consumed great chunks of the university budget, and classes like Poultry Economics and Swine Systems Management still ruled the curriculum.

Turning into the circular driveway of the president's house, Elspeth realized that she was betting her school's future, and her own, on the hope that President Bartles, a soils scientist who had clawed his way up through the ranks of the Ag School, was smart enough to understand the university's trajectory as well as its history: that in the future the shine on his institution's apple was not going to come from beef and grain. State's future glory was going to emanate from the newer schools, the Law School first among them, or so the dean prayed.

President Bartles himself came to the door, in chinos and a pink tennis shirt that deepened the natural flush of smooth cheeks to which lemony cologne had been liberally applied. "The loveliest of my deans!"

Elspeth quickly reviewed the possible responses before deciding on, "Is Mrs. Bartles home?"

"No, she's upstate visiting her sister." The president's color deepened a shade or two before he turned back into the house.

Again, Elspeth debated strategy as she followed the president through a succession of darkly furnished public rooms.

"Well here we are. *Sanctum sanctorum*. My man cave. No one is allowed in here but the housekeeper."

And not recently, Elspeth thought. A greasy film of dust covered every surface in the small, low-ceilinged study. Except for the massive television screen hanging on the opposite wall, the room looked as if it had been furnished by the state dormitory authority. There was a pole lamp, and the couch was little more than a slab of foam rubber on a wooden frame. Paperbacks and magazines were piled on bookshelves made of rough-cut pine boards. Below the shelves was an algae-clogged aquarium. Two listless tropical fish glanced at the president and his visitor, gulped, and moved on. The curtains on the den's single window were drawn, and there was a mustiness about the room that reminded Elspeth of the canvas army tent her father brought on their long-ago camping trips in the Maine woods.

A collection of family photographs occupied the top, mahogany-stained shelf, but it was a framed picture apart from the others that drew Elspeth's attention. She looked a second time and suppressed a cry. The photograph was of Rawleigh in black tie, his tuxedoed arm thrown around the bare shoulders of none other than Elspeth herself.

The president must have seen her reaction, for again his color deepened. "Don't you remember last year's reunion, Ellie? In June?"

The alumni event explained Rawleigh's formal attire and Elspeth's low-cut cocktail dress, but not the picture's presence here, set apart from the family photos like an icon in a shrine. Elspeth's sexual adventures had exposed her to the full spectrum of carnal eccentricity—and she also had appetites and fantasies of her own—but they were light-years removed from anything as creepy as this. Her thoughts must have been evident, because the president said, "I imagine the housekeeper moved the picture the last time she cleaned."

The lucite frame, when Elspeth lifted it to examine the picture, exposed a gleaming strip of varnished wood. The shelf hadn't been dusted for months. In the photograph, Rawleigh's eyes glowed red, probably from the photographer's flash, but oddly Elspeth's did not. A jury could debate whether the expression on

the president's face was a smile or a leer, but no one would dispute that Rawleigh's eyes were aimed precisely, like a rifle at a rabbit, at what Elspeth in conversations with herself referred to as her "glorious cleavage."

The president took the picture from her hands and returned it to the shelf, where it disappeared behind the others, then looked at his watch. "I think you wanted to talk about your budget." He glanced at the watch a second time. "You should know, Ellie, I don't have time for any of your tricks."

Women had no trouble remembering Elspeth's given name, but men were powerless to call her anything but Ellie. The reason was transparently clear. The diminutive was meant to diminish her, to remove her as a threat. Yet, as much as she resented it, the dean never let on, for to do so would be to let these men believe that they had won; that she had capitulated. "No tricks," she said, raising her hands as if to demonstrate that she had nothing lodged up her sleeves.

The president deposited a few dusty granules from a small canister into the fish tank. "Then maybe you can tell me how, in a fiscal year in which the legislature has slashed the university budget twenty percent, a year in which I have been forced to ask every school and department to do the same, you have the temerity to deliver a budget to my finance office proposing a ten percent increase. I know where you get your ideas from, Ellie, but this isn't Yale. It's State."

State. No one had ever accused Elspeth of possessing delicate sensibilities, but her insides clenched at the brutish word. *Yale*, on the other hand, her alma mater—what a glorious, if slightly dissolute, champagne bubble of a name. Or *Harvard*, two plump syllables to melt elegantly on the tongue like a slice of *foie gras* or Perigord truffle, rich with the savor of history. *Stanford.* Elegant in its own way, and beautifully lacquered with the sun-speckled patina of the western frontier. Even *Chicago* and *Columbia* evoke delight as they toss urban grit into the machinery of highbrow intellectualism; and so many syllables! But *State.* A name for rubes and yokels, hayseeds with cow pies clinging to their boots.

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