

Executive Session

by Stephen Russell Payne

Harry Thurber stepped closer to Claude. “We best be going in before they come out and get you.”

Claude rolled his empty pipe around in the palm of his hand but said nothing.

“I know you’re about at wit’s end, but you’ve got to get this over with.”

Claude slipped his pipe into the shirt pocket of his overalls. “I don’t know, Harry. I’m so worn out, even my teeth are tired.”

“You can do it. We’ve fried bigger fish ‘n this.”

Claude nodded then followed Harry into the town hall meeting room. Claude sat in the first chair by the door. Harry sat at the end of the table and leaned his cane against the wall. The heavy steam radiator beneath the window hissed and cracked, the room already too warm for an October afternoon.

Frank Pellini, the recently elected select board chairman, took off his bifocals and set them on the worn oak table in front of him. It had been a difficult, politically charged investigation, and though he was resolute, he didn’t relish delivering the news. He looked at no one in particular when he spoke. “I have given this matter a great deal of thought.” He paused. “And after careful consideration of the facts, my recommendation to this Board is that Claude Demers be relieved of his duties as Road Commissioner and never drive a piece of town equipment again.”

The deep lines of Claude’s forehead sagged. He sat motionless, leaning on one arm of his chair, the bowl of his pipe drooping from his pocket.

Reg Tetrault shot out of his chair. “What the hell you talking about? He barked at Chairman Pellini, who had moved to town just two years before. “Claude’s been taking care of our roads for nearly half a century. He’s the best snow plower in Vermont, for Christ’s sakes.” Reg leaned across the table closer to Pellini. “You ain’t taking his plow away from him.”

“Settle down, Reg,” Pellini said.

“I ain’t going to settle down. You outsiders come in here, think you know how to run everything. Well, as long as I’m alive, you’ve got another thing ‘a comin’.” Reg thumped back into his chair.

Mr. Pellini picked up his glasses and motioned around the table. “You all grew up here, have known each other your whole lives. But that doesn’t obviate the fact that last summer Claude’s carelessness nearly took the life of a young girl. It’s already cost the town fifty thousand and it could be years before it’s finally settled. We can’t afford the liability of a similar situation occurring in the future.”

Reg shook his head. “He’s never been charged with a crime. Even Judge Thompson said that Claude, the kid, and her parents were all partly to blame for the accident.”

“Be that as it may, Claude *was* driving the town grader when the blade cut into Missy Rosenthal’s abdomen causing her to nearly bleed to death in front of her parents.”

Claude fiddled with the arm of his chair. “I never meant to hurt that little girl. The street was closed off. I put them barricades up myself.” He adjusted the oil-stained cap on his head. “She come out of nowhere from behind that pile of gravel. I tried to stop...”

Claude choked up as he spoke. The whole ordeal had nearly killed him. Forty-five years with nothing more than a bent mailbox and then this.

“Course you couldn’t stop,” Reg said. “That kid ran right out in front of you.” He turned and glared at Pellini. “Besides, if that’d been some local farm girl instead of a rich tourist’s kid we wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Pellini ignored him and continued. “What if this winter Claude runs over someone with his plow? We could never defend the town. How could we live with ourselves?” He looked at Claude. “I’ve discussed this at length with the town attorney, and he thinks—”

Reg slammed his hand on the table. “That lawyer’s nothin’ but one of your flatlander friends. Why should we care what he thinks?”

“The town’s fortunate to have Tony working with us. You didn’t have a real attorney before I brought him in.”

“We were a hell of a lot better off, too,” Reg said.

“Look, people,” Pellini said, “some things *have* to change around here. You can’t hang on to all your old, provincial ways.”

“Like what?” Harry asked, indignantly.

“Like granting building permits and paving driveways for nothing for your friends while ignoring the needs of new people who’ve decided to move here.” Pellini’s face tightened. He looked at Reg. “Like opening up your hardware store any old time – night or day— for your cronies, but not staying open an extra five minutes on Christmas Eve so I could get batteries for my grandson.”

Reg looked away.

Pellini composed himself. "You have to consider how your actions appear to people from the outside world."

"I don't give a goddamn what they think of us," Reg said.

"Well you'd better start because they're all around you. Where do you think a lot of our town revenue comes from?" He waited a moment. "I'll tell you where. From all those tourists who drive up here from New York and New Jersey and Boston and spend millions of dollars on your maple syrup and hunting licenses, and skiing on our mountains. They won't keep coming if their children are in danger of getting run over by a road commissioner with bad eyes."

"I got new glasses since the accident," Claude said, touching his thick black frames.

Sitting at the end of the table, Harry Thurber cleared his throat. The room became quiet. "If I follow your logic, Mr. Pellini, because I'm eighty years old, got a gimp leg, and am pretty set in my ways, soon you'll also be replacing me as fire chief."

"That's not the issue we're here to discuss."

Claude sat up in his chair, pointed his finger at Pellini. "Now you listen here, Mister, there ain't a fire chief in this state more respected than Harry Thurber. He's saved this town more times than I can count. Hell, fire departments from all over the North Coutry call to get his advice."

"And don't you be making fun of Harry's bum leg," Claude continued. "He got that in France fighting for our country. Got nothing to do with his age."

“Look, I’m not advocating replacing the old town crew all at once. I’m saying you’ve got to realize these inevitabilities. Times have changed. Life isn’t simple anymore. People are worried about the Town getting ruined in another law suit. In large part, that’s why I was elected Chairman of this Board. Anyway, the issue here is Claude, not Harry, the War, or the fire department.”

There was a knock on the meeting room door.

“Come in,” Pellini said.

Dressed in a dark pinstripe suit and polished black shoes, town attorney Tony Malto, stepped into the room, set his briefcase on the table and sat down.

“Great,” Reg said sarcastically under his breath.

Mr. Malto opened his briefcase and took out a yellow pad and pen.

“Things aren’t going particularly well,” Pellini said to him.

“These are difficult matters,” Mr. Malto said, unbuttoning his suit coat. He looked around the room. “Would it be helpful if I spoke to the matter at hand from the town’s legal point of view?”

“Aren’t *we* the town?” Reg asked.

“Well, yes, at least a representation of it.” Mr. Malto replied. “North Branch has grown dramatically. It’s not the same sleepy town it was ten or twenty years ago. It has been ‘discovered,’ if you will and become a favorite getaway for city people. In fact, many of them are winterizing their vacation homes and moving here year round.”

“Yeah,” Reg said, “they’re building fancy houses, ruining hay fields our families have farmed for generations.”

“That may be partly true,” Mr. Malto said. “Some over-development has been done by out-of-staters. On the other hand, they have preserved a lot of land because they can afford to build a house on a hundred acres and keep the rest of the property open. Some of the most dense and, in my opinion, worst development has been done by local developers who jam far too many double-wides onto one field, completely changing the landscape. And they couldn’t do it if local farm families weren’t throwing in the towel and selling out.”

“If they paid our farmers a decent price for their milk their kids would stay at home and keep farming – not run off to the city.” Reg said. “Besides, locals got a right to live however they want.”

“I understand how you feel,” Mr. Malto said, “but as a public municipality we can’t condone double standards.”

“T’ain’t a double standard. Native’s got more rights than outsiders,” Reg replied.

“I’m afraid that’s not true.”

Harry leaned forward. “Thanks for the civics lesson, Mr. Malto, but what’s all this got to do with Claude losing his plow?”

Mr. Malto turned to Harry. “Many locals believe what happened to Mr. Demers could have happened to anyone, that they were all victims of bad circumstance. Other people, particularly summer folks, feel much has been overlooked, that a danger is being swept under the rug.” He turned to Claude. “Is it not true, Mr. Demers, that well before the accident you were found to have poor vision with the glasses you were wearing that day?”

Claude reluctantly nodded in the affirmative.

“And didn’t Doctor Marshall find that you had been having dizzy spells off and on for some time, including while working?”

“He found all kind of things wrong with me, but now he’s got my blood pressure and sugar – all that stuff – under control. I can’t wait to plow with these new glasses.”

“The point is, Mr. Demers, you continued to work while physically disabled, and that calls into question the quality of your judgment. Eyesight is pretty essential for a truck driver.”

“I didn’t realize anything was wrong with me is all. I never stop for very long. I get up early, do my work, and get home at night to tend to Mary. Her paralysis is getting real bad. Deer season and maple sugaring are the only times of year I take off. That’s when her sister comes down from Quebec to watch her.”

Harry looked across the table at his oldest friend. “I’ll bet you’ve never taken a Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Years off, have you Claude?”

Claude shook his head. “Can’t. Weather’s almost always bad and with all them people on the roads, I got to keep ‘em clear.” He looked at the floor. “I would have gone to Doc sooner if I’d known I could hurt someone.”

Mr. Malto leaned toward Claude. “Mr. Demers, we are in no way negating the good things you have done over the years, the service you’ve provided to the town. But we – Mr. Pellini and I—are deeply concerned with preventing another accident. As difficult as it is to say, we just don’t feel you’re safe anymore.”

The spirit drained out of him, Claude hung his head.

Pellini spoke in a subdued voice. “Would you like to say anything else to the Board before we go into executive session?”

After a few moments, Claude came to his feet. “All I ever wanted to be was a road man. You get to do all kinds of things, but I like snow plowing best.” He turned to Harry. “We been through some awful storms together, haven’t we? Like the blizzard of ‘68, forty-two inches in twenty-four hours. Snow came down so fast I had to keep one of our plow trucks stationed in front of the firehouse for three days to clear the way for the engines to get to their calls.”

“Only had my trucks freeze up once, in 1971, when the mercury hit forty below five days in a row. The night the plows froze, the globes on the street lamps popped when the bulbs came on at dusk. Had shattered glass all over the streets in the morning.”

Chairman Pellini waited a few moments. “Is there anything else?”

Claude stepped forward and leaned on the edge of the table. “I need to work another year till I’m sixty-five to get my full pension. That would help out a lot with taking care of Mary. The visiting nurses are wonderful, but they aren’t cheap. I just can’t do it all myself.” He paused, looked at Pellini in the eye. “Would you see if you can keep me on ‘till my birthday next summer?”

Attorney Malto looked away.

Chairman Pellini cleared his throat. “Thank you, Claude. You may go home while the Select board deliberates. We’ll call you as soon as a decision is made.”

Harry stood. With his cane in one hand and his other arm around Claude, they walked out of the room.

In the hallway, Harry paused and looked at Claude. “Whatever happens in there, you’re one of the best men I’ve ever known. I’ll do what I can.”

Claude thanked him, pulled on his overcoat and walked outside where a cold wind was lifting piles of leaves, swirling them around the parking lot like small tornados.

Harry watched Claude drive off in his pickup. Then Harry walked solemnly back to the meeting room.

It was late afternoon when Claude got home. Elizabeth, the visiting nurse, was still with Mary—it was her bath day— so he walked to his workshop attached to the side of the barn. He paused at a large pile of unsplit fire wood then stepped inside and took comfort in the familiar aroma of wood shavings, gasoline, and chain saw oil.

At his work bench Claude filled his pipe with Prince Albert tobacco as he looked out the cob-webbed window at the rocky pasture cleared over a century ago by his great grandfather. As he sucked the flame of a wooden match into the bowl, a few light snow flurries began dancing in the air. He stood back and perused the many wood-handled tools hanging from the hemlock rafters. “Sure would be nice to spend more time in here,” he thought to himself.

Claude took his Winchester down from the deer antler gun rack mounted over the window. He wiped the barrel with a chamois cloth moistened with gun blue then walked back outside. He tightened his collar around his neck and, with his pipe clenched in his teeth, headed across the pasture to the stump of an old sugar maple he’d cut last summer, just after the grader accident. He sat down and laid the rifle across his lap.

Claude looked back at the house and thought about how much Mary and he had wanted to have children when they were younger. He was grateful that over the years they'd pretty much accepted their disappointments without blaming each other. He'd found himself a damn good woman.

As an early snow gently fell, a slender red fox ventured out of his hole and pounced on some poor creature next to an abandoned hay bale in the middle of the field. A hawk soared over the tall pine trees at the top of the knoll and a trio of chipmunks chased each other in and out of holes in the stone wall at the edge of the woods.

Sitting on the cold stump seemed to relieve the burning at the base of Claude's spine, the nagging pain and numbness down the back of his right leg. Probably way too many nights riding the rough roads in stiff dump trucks over the years. He'd bounced over more pot holes and ruts than a body ever should. And he'd pushed and pulled a thousand rigs out of the thick spring mud over the years. Claude rapped his pipe on the side of the stump, slid it into his pocket and closed his eyes.

The hillside had turned dark and cold by the time Claude was aroused by Elizabeth's voice. As he straightened his stiff back, he realized he'd fallen asleep, his hands still clenched around the gun stock, his overalls covered with a thin layer of snow.

Elizabeth stood beside him, holding her coat tight about her. "Shirley called from the town hall. They want you to come back down."

Claude dusted the snow off his rifle. "Thanks," he said, standing. "I must have dozed off."

They walked back across the pasture to the house. Elizabeth had been a great caregiver for Mary and a kind buffer for him. As Mary's MS had worsened her daily routine had become more and more uncomfortable for him. Elizabeth had helped both him and Mary maintain as much of their dignity as possible.

"A lot of people are rooting for you," Elizabeth said, pausing in front of the house. "Good luck." Then she climbed into her Subaru and drove off.

Claude walked inside the house, leaned his rifle against the coat rack by the door. Mary was lying on the day bed in the living room, her favorite blue and white quilt tucked under her chin.

"Gettin' cold out," he said, walking over to her. He gently touched her cheek with his leathery hand.

Mary opened her eyes.

"I'll stoke the fire then I've got to go back down, see what they've decided to do with me."

Mary's hand came out from under the quilt. "Come here, old boy." It was hard for her to speak, having lost control of many of her muscles.

Claude sat on the rose colored ottoman next to her.

"How you holding up?" Her words were slow and deliberate.

He looked at his bride of forty-six years. "I admit they've worn me down some."

"You going to fight anymore?"

Claude shook his head. "Don't know. Hate to give up, but I'm not sure how much fire's left in me."

Mary slid her trembling hand over his forearm. “You’re a good man, Claude. Do what your heart says and you’ll be okay.”

Claude felt tears well up in his eyes. He patted the wrinkled skin of her hand. “Maybe I need to spend more time here with you.”

“That’d be nice,” she said, smiling. “But do what *you* want to do.” She pulled her hand back under the covers and rested.

Claude walked into the kitchen and filled the wood stove. He drank a glass of cold spring water then paused at the front door, staring at the key rack that had been there since they got their first car in the early fifties.

He slowly lifted his town truck keys from the wrought iron hook they’d hung on for forty-five years and slid them into his pocket. Then he walked over to Mary, kissed her on the forehead and left.

When he pulled into the parking lot at the town hall, no one was waiting at the door for him. He figured that was a bad sign. He clomped the mud off his boots and walked inside.

The building smelled of coffee, the fluorescent lights from the meeting room illuminating the leaf-strewn hallway. Claude approached the door and peered inside. Pellini, Harry, Reg, Tony, and Shirley were all sitting around the table, the remnants of a pepperoni pizza on paper plates in front of them.

Claude turned the glass doorknob and stepped into the room.

“Come in, Mr. Demers,” Chairman Pellini said. “Please sit down.”

Claude kept his coat on and stood in front of the table.

Pellini looked over his bifocals. "I'll get right to the point. In light of your many years of service to the Town, the Board has decided to offer you a step-down position until you reach full retirement age next summer. We'll hire a new truck man and you can break him in. You will be prohibited from driving, but you can ride with him, show him the ropes." Pellini looked genuinely pleased, almost smiling as he waited for Claude's response.

Claude looked around the room at his friends, then at the Chairman. "So you don't think I'm safe to plow anymore?"

Harry fidgeted in his seat. "Well, Claude, that's not..."

Pellini cut him off. "That's correct, Claude, but we feel you can do a good job training a new man. It will keep you on the roads until you turn sixty-five as you requested."

Claude took a step back from the group. He closed his eyes, saw Mary's face surrounded by her blue quilt. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the keys to the town truck. He fondled the St. Francis medallion that had ridden with him all those stormy nights. He considered taking it off the ring, but figured the new man would need it more than he did.

Claude leaned forward and reverently set the keys on the table. "I've plowed a lot of miles for this town, been out all hours of the day and night chasing snow storms and cutting up downed trees. Got an awful sore back and arthritis has set into my knees."

Claude shifted his weight from one leg to another. "While you was in your executive session, I spent some time thinking and realized I'm kind of tired. Now that

she's pretty much bed ridden, Mary needs me home more and I got a big wood pile to split and, hopefully, more hunting to do." He looked at Harry. "And I can't be where I'm not safe."

Claude turned, walked out of the room and down the hallway. He zipped his coat up tight and stepped into the frosty night a free man.

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