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Meeting of Experts

At lunch break they got the post-card. Stanley picked the card, and for its ugliness alone. It was a grotesque plasticized geisha who winked incongruously when the card was tilted. No one could receive such a card in the mail without extreme embarrassment. Henry was surprised that it was for sale in these politically- correct times. He bought it as a curiosity. The Hotel du roi in Gatineau catered to a wide range of needs. Meeting rooms were rented. The rather elegant dining room served excellent meals, and around the corner in the smoke shop one had the choice of a wide range of toys, pornographic videos for sale and rent, and of course, post cards.

Lunch had been a break from the meeting of experts from across the country and officials from Ottawa. They had been called together to discuss the implementation of the pilot project. The project itself was highly technical and involved information technology and telecommunications and for this reason people with expertise had been brought to Ottawa and to an all-day meeting in the Hotel du roi.

World rank experts were among the people from Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Montreal and Halifax who had been flown in for the meeting. Obscure but highly respected professors were also there. Representatives of large commercial concerns with interests in the pilot project had come, some by plane and some by car. These people carried cellular phones which chirped from time to time, causing individuals to leave the room for pressing conversations. Officials from the Agency at Arms Length had driven to the Hotel in a rented van. Notwithstanding the pillorying of a Privacy Commissioner for excessive

entertainment spending, they had also chosen to meet there rather than in their Ottawa offices, ten miles away.

The meeting itself had begun at 9:30 a.m.. Fourteen people were in the meeting room at that time: experts, academics, representatives of competing commercial concerns who hissed at each other between cellular phone calls, and three officials from the Agency at arms length. One was Bill, the chair of the meeting and the director of the pilot program branch of the Agency. The other two officials were introduced by name only. Adrienne wore stockings with a large green and mauve checkerboard pattern above her winged pumps. Claude presented a Bertie Wooster blazer and manner. Their modish attire alone made one wonder what their functions could conceivably be.

"Let's get on with the meeting," Bill had said. "Thanks for coming. I guess you all will have read the bios of your colleagues from the preliminary materials? Yes? Fine. Perhaps you can introduce yourselves and tell us something about your areas of expertise." Around the table the technical experts and university professors -including Henry and Stanley -- and commercial representatives introduced themselves. Adrienne and Claude introduced themselves but gave no hint of their respective areas of expertise. Bill introduced himself. "Good. Our first item is the background to the pilot project," Bill said. "Claude, could you please give us a run-down?" "Glad to oblige, Bill," said Claude, who then proceeded with the background to the project. "As you may or may not be aware," he began, "this project had its inception in the meeting of the OCMD in 1992 in Stockholm. I beg your pardon. I meant to say Operational Committee of Ministerial Designates. The committee had been created by the OECD -- the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development -- in order to advance the purposes which we are now seeking to bring into a more concrete fruition -- pardon my mixed metaphor -through the pilot we are currently discussing. Later that same

year, 1993, in October, a second meeting was held in Karachi...."

And that was the morning. Claude led the assembled academics and technical experts through an astonishing number of acronyms for meetings perhaps similar to this one.

By mid-morning he had covered the period 1992 to 2003. His lecture had been interrupted two times. Once the interruption was the arrival of the Minister responsible for the Agency at Arms Length, who had swept into the room and who had greeted each of the people with polished elegance. "Must run, another meeting," she said, and swept out of the room.

The second interruption was the assistant deputy minister, Bill's immediate supervisor, who addressed the group. He spoke of the preparations for the present meeting in a manner which suggested that he had either learned it from or taught it to Claude. "By golly, Bill's done such a fine job getting you all together. You know back in March it didn't seem we could get it together. Then Maury had the idea for the poster and it wasn't much to subcontract the graphic work. Then there was the actual room. Last fiscal year we had a little cash to spend and that's when we booked rooms in the Doo Roy for a series of meetings of this type. Then in June...."

All the while Bill cringed at the head of the table, one hand in front of his mouth, his body language saying, "I had to invite him, he's my boss.)"

During the lunch break the technical experts and the academics were able to talk too. "Ummm, long build-up to this project..., " said Henry.

"I wonder how much time they spend doing acronym training," wondered Stanley.

"Could I make it to Montreal this afternoon?" asked the expert from Vancouver.

"My flight home is booked for tomorrow morning."

"Guess I have to sit through the rest of this," said the academic from Calgary, with a groan.

After lunch Bill recapitulated all the acronyms introduced by Claude. His review was rapid and expert. He obviously enjoyed his mastery of this arcane material. He only took twenty minutes to cover what had taken Claude two hours. There were no questions. The commercial representatives and their cellular phones had not returned after lunch. Claude concluded his history of the acronyms and their dates.

At two o'clock, Bill moved to the next item, namely the discussion of the pilot project. Each of the assembled experts and academics was asked for a summary statement.

"This project has already been done," began the first, the expert from Vancouver who wished he was in Montreal. And one after another, each of the experts and academics summarized their views: The project had been done. It is covering old ground. We know the answer. We know how to do this. We've known how to do this for years.

"There's nothing more that could possibly be discovered about this topic," concluded the last academic.

Their summaries were punctuated by Bill, who, after each speaker, said "Good. Thank you. Let's just make sure we are focusing on the pilot. It's still a go, you know."

For some time Henry and Stanley had been playing tic-tac-toe when, suddenly, Henry pulled out the grotesque post card they had bought at lunch.

Carefully he wrote in the address: Mr. Bill Williams, Director, Pilot Project Branch, Agency at Arms Length, Ottawa K2G 1V9. Henry passed the card to Stanley.

"SUCH A LONG TIME SINCE WE SPOKE IN KARACHI," Stanley printed in large block letters in the message area of the post card.

"Simone and all the gals at DPS-6 speak of you often," wrote Henry, hoping this sounded like a reference to the picture on the other side of the card. He passed the card back to Stanley.

"Cindy will soon be six," wrote Stanley, passing the card to Henry.

"You know what we all used to say in OBMS:" wrote Henry.

Not knowing what they used to say in OBMS, Stanley copied a long string of Japanese characters from the back of the VCR which was sitting near them in the room. "Probably says 'No user-serviceable parts inside -- danger of shock'," he whispered to Henry.

Henry added an indecipherable squiggle that looked like a signature.

"Wow. Meaningless acronyms on an anonymous card: it'll drive him nuts when he gets it. Will you mail it?" asked Henry.

"No, I will," whispered the expert from Vancouver, who had been watching these developments. "I'll mail it from Buenos Aires next week. Let's just hope the RCMP reads his mail and thinks it's a code."

By then Bill was thanking them for their input. He anticipated the pilot project would be unveiled by the minister in St. Johns. "It should be ready for the IGTMC in May," he said.

--Rudi Aksim

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