

The Board Meeting

by Rosalyn St Pierre

The rain pours down from harsh metallic clouds, dismal grey light hardly permeates the bullet-proof double glazing. Striding down the long corridor towards the stairs The Chairman pays little regard to those around him. As he passes, people stand aside, heads lowered, no one wants to look into his eyes. They have developed a keen sense of self preservation. The Chairman has been developing a plan, almost at completion level. Now it is time to run an outline before his few trusted Board members. His childhood obsession with chess has disciplined him to long-term forward planning. The slight, difficult to detect manoeuvres, are yet to be completed but he is sure this will be a winner.

He resents this call for lunch in the canteen, surrounded by so many, but that is the way of modern business. He acquiesces. No choice in reality, but is reassured the Japanese and their CEO's are sitting with the workers in factory canteens, are wearing the same company uniform as their minions, and yet achieving unbelievable commercial profit. He is not quite at that stage, and so considers there is one slight compensation for lunch in the canteen. The Board can have an informal meeting, the background noise making the muttered conversation difficult for eavesdroppers or poorly placed microphones to overhear.

As he approaches their table, he is pleased to see Dmitri has stationed his bodyguard at the next table. Despite the canteen becoming fairly crowded the bodyguard sits alone, his eyes continually sweeping the room, ensuring they will not be disturbed. The more recently recruited Board members are impressed. Without doubt, a bodyguard, such a luxury, is a statement of power.

Luigi, Finance Director, is uneasy, pushing his food around the plate, muttering about how inedible and tasteless it is. Liam too is silent, Liam who usually starts each Board meeting with a joke. Even Simon is restless, he, whose facade is normally so urbane, louche that it hides his ruthless dealings with enemies, or those he perceives as enemies.

Simon starts,

'Mr Chairman, we have trouble.'

'Tell me.'

'Over there, by the door. God only knows how he was let in here. We were assured, only family members and occasionally someone from a trusted firm would be permitted.'

Luigi looks around the Board,

'Who is he, what's all the fuss, he's only a kid, doubt if he's passed the initiation rituals yet.'

A smile passes around the Board. Dmitri leans back and speaks to the bodyguard, nods and turns to the Board.

‘Ivan tells me not yet. He’s been watching the lad and Ivan doesn’t miss a thing. Want him to set up a special session?’

The Chairman hesitates. Unbidden, a sudden image of a chess piece falling. Does he need to make changes to the project? Hands together, his fingers making a pyramid he asks,

‘Remind me, who is he?’

‘Rashy Ryan or Rashid Ryan.’

Two of the Board have a rapid intake of breath,

‘So? An unusual name don’t you think Liam?’

Liam puts his head in his hands,

‘His Dad is an Uzbek warlord and his mum has, how can I put it, connections in Belfast.’

The Chairman is angry, really angry.

‘Sebastian as Head of HR can you tell me how you fucked up to let this low life in here! Here of all places!’

Sebastian is remorseful,

‘He must have outside powerful connections.’

The Board is silent. They turn to watch this newcomer, they notice the insolent look thrown their way, they see the way he puts an hand on the arm of the staff member in charge of the canteen and not in a way that would indicate he was afraid of being poisoned, more at laughing at these elderly men seated around a distant table.

The Chairman considers the options and, unusually, he shares these with the Board,

‘We could arrange Ivan to lead the initiation, nothing terminal, but to deprive the lad of speech... for the long term.’

He pauses and senses a reluctance, an understanding among his colleagues, that retribution if it came to them would be long and very, very painful.

‘Or we could include him in, he’s young and fit and has connections that could be to our advantage.’

Liam sighs,

‘You’re right Mr Chairman we could, but those guys have been known to double cross.’

He pauses before suggesting the most unthinkable of possibilities,

‘Or he could be a plant.’

Undeterred the Chairman turns to Luigi,

‘Could we buy him out, offer him our private care health and family insurance package?’

‘That’s the problem Mr Chairman, funds are low, investors are withdrawing, saying the Project has no beneficial outcome to them, the duplicitous bastards.’

‘We’ll talk about later, we do not want to make rash decisions, so let’s say 4 p.m. my office?’

Later each member of the Board sits in their small ‘office’, each holding a photo of an Irish mountain, or a Serbian meadow, or an Italian village, or a Surrey lawn and each can smell the grassy smell of earth and young greenery of gentle freedom that makes a man’s heart ache when the realisation of escape from these prison walls is now impossible.