

Tribunal

Of all the places Henry had to end up, it was in front of Augusta Green. The bench stretched to the ceiling, so high the flags flanking the seats touched the fluorescent lights. Henry squinted up. Augusta glared down.

He had been summoned to the Emotion Protection Tribunal in front of Nerod Genderflake and Sistine Blanderholden. Augusta Green, Chairperson of the E.P.T., the Flavour Identity Council, the Step Count Equity Board, the Mothers Against Hiring the Most Qualified Candidate Panel, and the Anti-Stigma in Dreams Coalition, sat in the middle.

Sistine Blanderholden bent to the microphone and cleared her throat. “Henry Doanne, you stand before us with prejudice for the offense of opening the door for a Ms. Vandersloot, for which she suffered extreme anxiety as it caused her to believe you felt her incapable of doing so. The complainant has submitted a psychological report which contends that as a result of your actions, Ms. Vandersloot has developed an eating disorder, a compulsion to exercise which has damaged the ligaments in her arms, and clinical helplessness for which the report also contends Ms. Vandersloot maintains the locus of control of her life exists only in men at coffee shops. She has been escorted off property on numerous occasions because of this and has therefore also suffered public humiliation. What say you to these determinations, Mr. Doanne?”

The panel scowled downward. Augusta Green, stuffed in a stiff grey suit, sat like an elephant on top of a totem pole.

“Her hands were f-full,” Henry stuttered. “She had a bag in one hand and a tray of coffee in the other.” He pantomimed the act.

“Do you not think she could have used her back to push the door forward?” Nerod Genderflake said in a choked voice, as if he had no nose. His nose, in fact, was the length of his forearm, having been surgically enhanced to sniff out nonconformists.

“Maybe,” Henry said. In truth, he hadn’t thought of that. He had just seen the woman struggling with her arms full and thought to make it easier on her by opening the door. “It was raining, so it could’ve ended up badly, you know, if she walked backwards through a door like that.”

The panellists looked at each other. Augusta Green leaned forward. She pushed her glasses up to the bridge of her nose to better see the sweat forming on Henry’s skin.

“I see,” said Augusta Green. “By which you mean that Ms. Vandersloot is unqualified to navigate public thresholds unless in perfect conditions?”

Genderflake sniffed. Leaves on the fake potted plants behind Henry rustled.

Henry said, “That’s not what I meant. I didn’t mean anything at all except to help make it easier for her. You know? Be a nice guy? The world could use more of that.”

Sistene Blanderholden gasped. “So only men are capable of changing the world?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But you did say, and I quote,” said Augusta Green, inspecting the telescreen the atonostenographer reported in real-time, “‘be a nice guy’, as if those persons not leaping to the unnecessary aid of fully capable people are misanthropes? Do you so appropriate this label upon your fellow citizens, Mr. Doanne?”

Henry had no idea what a misanthrope was but the way it curdled off Augusta Green's tongue, he knew he didn't want to be one. "Um," he said, when it was clear they were expecting a response.

Augusta Green's eyebrows went up like two taut guillotines. "It means sociopath, Mr. Doanne, and it's a heavy charge for responsible citizens who, unlike yourself, who value independence and, as such, the sovereignty of others. Your actions severely suggest imperialistic tendencies that must be tempered for the good of our good country."

"Imperialist!" Sistine Blanderholden shouted.

"Imperialist!" Nerod Genderflake agreed vehemently, shaking a fist.

"Have you self-flagellated, Mr. Doanne?" Augusta Green asked after the others had stopped shouting.

Henry blushed. "I don't see how that's related but I would say that's personal and it's not really appropriate to share private moments like that in public."

Few rockets shot up faster than Augusta Green. "Mis-Ter Doanne! That is not what flagellate means. It means, have you sufficiently introspected and punished yourself for your unconscionable actions?"

"I just opened a door. . ."

"Well then," said Augusta Green without glancing at her counterparts. "We have conferred and determined you, Henry Doanne of 19 Maverick Way, Somerset, Vancouver, have offended public sovereignty and fine you two hundred thousand dollars, plus Ms. Vanersloot's representation fees, which amount to —" she eyed the telescreen— "one hundred and twenty

three thousand dollars. Additionally, we order you to attend an Enlightened Proprieties class at any of our universities. Should you fail to attend or receive an unacceptable evaluation by any of our unfettered professors, you will be subjected to further correction by public flogging. Socially, you will be excoriated. You will lose your job. Your family will disown you. Your children, should you have any, will experience the brunt of your indiscretions. No institution of commerce or enjoyment will admit you nor allow your intolerance to sully their hallways. Let this be a lesson to you, Mr. Doanne. Case dismissed.” She slammed the gavel, eyed Henry with less compassion as one might a cockroach and left.

Sistine Blanderholden didn’t give Henry a second look but Nerod Genderflake shook his head for a long few seconds, then followed the other two through the small escape hatch and disappeared.

Outside, Henry seethed. He had done the right thing. He’d known he had and if he lived a thousand more years, it wouldn’t change his opinion. He’d been taught to hate nothing and no one, but he hated the tribunal. He wished he’d been borne before they were created. No — he wished he’d been borne before anyone with a self-serving agenda could just form a group and pass judgement on others, without anyone ever being able to measure up to their unreasonable standards. If he were in charge, he would disband all tribunals and the outlaw the egotistical behavior they ran on. That was the real problem. Choosing one set of beliefs and lording it over others, using it to debase anyone with a different opinion. He ruminated.

Then . . . an idea.

There was no law in Canada against forming a body of judgement. The country, in fact, was rife with them. It churned on censorship.

Henry worked the idea in his head. Within days and with much more thought than the vacuous, meteoric groupthink entities obliterating reason, he formed the Forum Against Tribunals, or F.A.T., for simplicity. Simmering outrage was on Henry's side. By the end of the week, seventy-two thousand six-hundred and eleven rational citizens joined the forum. By the end of the second week, Augusta Green was summoned in front of the forum to answer to the charge of propagating irrational behaviour counter to human civility and logic.

Stiff and full of hubris, Augusta Green stood defiantly before the twenty members chosen to hear the case.

"Kneel," Henry said. Then, "just kidding, this is an equal court. Please, have a seat."

Augusta Green stood.

"Okay then," said Henry. "You know the charges and we have sufficient evidence to proceed directly to adjudication."

"I will not comply," said August Green.

"You will," said Henry. "Because if you don't, you will be — what did you call it? — *publicly flogged*. You will lose your friends. You will lose your family. You will lose everything of value."

"Do you value *anything*?" said the small woman to Henry's left. At Augusta Green's insistence, she had been fired from her job for heating fish in the company's microwave during her lunch hour because it offended nasal autonomy.

"Get on with it," ordered Augusta Green, her face as slack as tightwire.

“Very well,” said Henry. “For the propagation of irrational behaviour counter to human civility and logic, we order you to participate in the gradual reintroduction of reason to your person. You will volunteer at a chosen daycare for a period of not less than eight months so you can be amongst people who have not yet been affected by absurdity. You will observe them relating equally to each other, not according to impulsive partisan doctrine. Then you will attend an aquarium for three months and observe aquatic creatures, none of whom have agendas of censure or castigation. You will write a five-thousand word essay on the benefits of swimming in your own lane, so to say. Lastly, you will be summoned to any of our hospice facilities where you will interview residents to gain perspective on what the dying have to say about what matters and how self-centralization kills faster than cancer. If our attempts to shed you of your irrationality fail, then we wish you peace, Ms. Green. You will need it.”

There was silence as hundred of onlookers waited.

Augusta Green looked at the crowd then looked at Henry Doanne.

Patches of red bloomed on Augusta Green’s face like dual cheek slaps. A tremble rose up her body then her eyes rolled back, her jaw twitched, and she convulsed in great spasms in front of their eyes.

“Someone help her!” a woman from the gallery cried.

But when Henry rushed to the fallen zealot, she was already gone. That which was Augusta Green, extinguished from its own righteousness, imploded.

After a time, when the gasps in the galley had subsided and Henry ordered the cleanup of Augusta Green’s brain matter from the floor, the Forum Against Tribunals disbanded and Henry Doanne went on opening doors.