

The Three Tenors

“My Dear Colleagues,

It is with profound sorrow (and joy!) that I announce my retirement effective the end of this month. Through these many years, I have enjoyed working with each and every one of you (more or less, and you know who you are). If you ever find yourself up Crater Lake, drift on by.

Yours,

Edward Lumbkin”

Colin dropped his head onto his desk. Lumbkin’s retirement memo stuck to one of his cheeks. He tried to slow his breathing. The end of this month, dear God. It was the fifteenth already. That meant Lumbkin would be gone in two weeks. How long did that give him? A month maybe, month-and-a-half at the most, before he was out on the street, collecting unemployment.

During his long career with the state, Colin had mastered one essential skill: brown-nosing. He’d put that skill to work to gain the directorship of the Division of Aesthetic Arts, which ran arts centers for the state’s foster youth. Pretty good for a guy who couldn’t tell his abstract from a Holbein on the wall. Upon achieving that lofty position, Colin embraced a new skill: delegating. His subordinates delighted in the trust he placed in them, and Colin delighted that his newly coined free time improved his golf game to an eight handicap.

But Colin’s scheme unraveled when a new governor closed the arts centers. And, soon after, Colin found his division assigned to a department with two directors, Lumbkin and Keaney, who loathed each other so fiercely that they never spoke to one another.

Colin spotted an opportunity. He told Keaney that Lumbkin had retained him to perform special projects. He told Lumbkin that Keaney had hired him as a personal assistant. Colin thought his artifice might buy him a little time to hunt for a new state job, but never imagined how well his plan would succeed. As week turned to month, and month to year, Colin decreased his profile until he all but disappeared. He kept his corner office, but he astutely removed his title from the door. He also kept his salary, a box of business cards, and, until she retired, his secretary. Fifteen years had now passed, and during that time Colin had performed not one jot of work.

Colin peeled Lumbkin's retirement memo from his cheek. His hands continued to tremble, but his heart had stopped pounding. What he needed more than anything was a stiff drink. Lumbkin would be gone at the end of the month. It would be only a matter of weeks, perhaps days, before Keaney discovered Colin's artifice and handed him his hat. That gave him precious little time to prepare for his own retirement. Or to come up with a new plan. Colin checked his wallet before heading across the street to the state capitol building.

To Colin, proximity to the Capitol, an architectural throwback to the Roman Empire, meant only one thing: access to special services that legislators had hidden within. Colin could get his clothing dry cleaned at one out-of-the-way office in the Capitol, his car registered at another, his shoes shined, his eyeglasses ordered, his prescriptions filled, his teeth cleaned, a suit tailored, his hair cut, and, lately, even his hair implanted if he had wanted it. Some of the services were intended for "members only," but Colin's graying temples and well-tailored suits allowed him to pass without challenge. On this day, his only thoughts were of the ATM machine in the basement followed by the members' bar on the fourth floor.

Colin entered the Capitol by leaning his bulk against the building's twenty-foot oak door. He pushed through hordes of school children and senior citizens, all favoring the same style in shorts and T-shirts. A Capitol tour guide stood facing a group of seniors in front of a statue of Columbus holding a globe while kneeling before Queen Isabella. Colin tuned in to the tour guide's spiel while he shifted from foot to foot, trying to negotiate his way around the group.

"Here we have Prunella, first queen of this territory, prior to statehood," the tour guide said. "As you can see, the sculptor depicts Queen Prunella at the very moment she relinquished the orb of power to the state's first governor, Pip Pirrip."

Colin stopped laughing when he realized the tourists were taking the guide at her word. Colin appraised the tour guide's high cheek bones and soft blue eyes. Difficult to see her figure in her getup, a state-issued sack-like blue apron covering a fluffy white blouse.

The tour guide gestured to the rotunda above the group's heads, a soaring structure lined to the ceiling with pink flocked wallpaper.

"As you can see," the tour guide said. "The Capitol rotunda served as the very model for every wedding cake baked during the past century. One hundred years ago, wedding cakes were as flat as pancakes. Hence the custom in the 1800s of giving the bride a frying pan on the wedding night. Sociologists have shown that the rise of the

rotunda led to an end of the wedding pan custom, and a very commensurate drop off in spousal abuse. One more example of your tax dollars at work to lessen violence.”

The tour guide moved down the hall, leading her glassy-eyed gaggle. Colin trailed behind. The tour guide turned to an ancient portrait, painted in shades of gray and black, depicting one of the state’s early governors.

“Please focus your attention on this painting of one of our first executives, Governor Pompadompa, inventor of the curling iron.”

Colin wondered why no one else in the crowd seemed to notice the caption, “Governor Chapman,” at the bottom of the painting. He caught the eye of the tour guide, who shifted her look and seemed suddenly uncomfortable. Colin no longer felt offense when young women failed to hold his gaze—he was fat, wrinkled and gray, and unless a woman mistook his leer for a fatherly grin, he expected her to look away.

The tour guide announced the next stop on the program—the old print shop—and led her willing captives off toward the northern basement stairway. Colin continued his journey to the southern stairway and the waiting ATM machine. After extracting several twenties from the ATM, Colin turned and bumped head-on into the tour guide, knocking her to the floor. Colin apologized profusely while lifting her to her feet.

“I am *so* sorry. I should have watched where I was going.”

“I’m all right. Don’t worry. Anyway, I expect I deserved that for the things I was saying to that group.”

“Are you serious? That was the funniest thing I’ve heard all week.” Colin tried to brush the tour guide’s apron, dusty from her spill, but she stepped back.

“Thanks, but I was a little off script,” the tour guide said. “I suppose you could fire me.”

“I could fire you? Why?”

“Don’t you work for the Capitol tour service?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“I just started a couple of weeks ago. They told me there’d be monitors. Spies is what they meant. And you were following me, dressed in a suit. Two and two.”

“My name’s Colin.” Colin reached for her hand. “I work across the street. I’m the director of the state’s Division of Aesthetic Arts.”

“I’m Toni Ball.” Toni retrieved her hand from Colin’s grasp. “That’s a new one on me. I had no idea the state had a division of aesthetic arts.”

Colin reached into his wallet and fished around until he found a business card that wasn’t too dog-eared.

“Division of Aesthetic Arts,” Toni said, turning the card over in her hand. “I was an Arts major in college. You hiring?”

Colin started to say no, but an idea came to him. He smiled slowly. “We’re always looking for bright, imaginative young people. Why don’t you stop by my office tomorrow with your resume.”

“I’ll be there,” Toni said. “Say, 8:00 a.m.?”

Colin almost choked. “Better make it noon.”

“You’re on.” Toni looked over her shoulder. “I see my group emerging from the anesthesia administered them in the historical print shop. I’d better get back there. See you tomorrow.”

Colin forgot about the members only bar. He practically skipped back to his office, his mind sorting the DNA of an embryonic plan. He found Edward Lumbkin in his office, placing his personal belongings into a cardboard box. Colin hadn’t spoken to Lumbkin in almost two years.

“Hello, Ed,” Colin said. “Came by to wish you the best.”

“Thanks, Colin. Haven’t seen you lately. The old prick must be keeping you busy.”

“Funny you should mention it. Keaney’s been running me ragged. I don’t mean to sound disloyal, but I expect you’ve noticed he’s a bit of a tightwad.”

Lumbkin snorted in approval.

“I’ve been asking him to allow me to hire an assistant for some time now. But he keeps begging off, blaming it on the budget crisis. Jeez, we haven’t had a budget crisis in years. Far as I know, the state’s flush.”

“Flush enough for me to ride out of here on the back of a porcine pension.”

“Good for you, Ed. If I don’t get some relief soon, I may have to follow you, just to keep my sanity.”

Lumbkin looked up from his cardboard box. “Hey? Anything I can do to help?”

Colin fought to maintain his poker face. He had him.

“I don’t think so. Although. No, it would probably just blow up in my face.”

“What?”

“I just had a thought. No, it would be too big an imposition. And I know you’re trying to get out of here.”

“No, really. What?”

“Well. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to process the paperwork for me to hire an assistant before you leave?”

Lumbkin’s eyes practically sparkled with the realization he’d just been handed an opportunity to undercut Keaney’s authority one last time before his retirement.

“What do you think, Colin? Bring your assistant in at an Admin. Analyst level?”

Colin was surprised. He was thinking Secretary I, at best. This would help his plan along. After thanking Lumbkin, Colin hurried to the personnel office to get the paperwork moving.

His work for the day—actually the decade—completed, Colin retreated to his own office. Ever since his secretary retired five years before, other employees had stored surplus junk in her workspace, an antechamber to Colin’s out-of-the-way corner office. Defunct computers and printers, cardboard boxes of indistinct content, and assorted bric-a-brac now so littered the area that Colin’s door was all but concealed. Colin made his first effort in years to organize the clutter. After several minutes of huffing, he managed to clear a larger path to his door and then gave up, figuring that if he hired Toni Ball, her first order of business would be to clean up the mess.

Toni Ball showed up the next day promptly at noon.

“We’ve been so darn busy, we haven’t even unpacked properly,” Colin said, gesturing at the boxes outside his office door. “Come in, come in. You’ve approached the division at a good time, Toni.”

Colin heaved his bulk around the desk and settled into his chair. “A time of opportunity. One of our department directors, Ed Lumbkin, has just announced his retirement, and his co-director, Richard Keaney, will be taking over. I’m certain the Division of Aesthetic Arts will be called on to justify its programs, perhaps its very existence. Quite frankly, Toni, we need an infusion of new blood, someone creative enough to step up to the plate and run the ball into the goal. I think you may have what the division needs at this historical moment.”

“This is so cool. You sound like you’re ready to hire me, and you haven’t even seen my resume yet.”

Colin noticed for the first time that Toni wore a gold post in her right nostril.

“Did you have that thing in your nose at the Capitol yesterday?”

“No, I take it out during the tours. But I thought, this being an arts division, there might be a hipper attitude about personal appearances.”

“Oh, hardly. Let me tell you about pay and benefits, and then you can tell me how important it is to wear that third nostril plug.”

As Colin described the compensation, health coverage, and pension eligibility of an administrative analyst, Toni reached into her right nostril, plucked out the stud, and placed it into her pocket.

“All right, then. I guess I should check out that resume.”

“Looks to be in order,” he said. “Phi Beta Kappa. Very impressive.” He noticed her internship with something called the American Anarchists League and tried not to lose his composure.

“This seems fine,” he said, sliding the resume under a pile of papers that had been gathering dust in his out box for several years. “From anarchist to tour guide. Interesting career choices. Let’s just say I was to give you this job. Tell me some of your ideas for reenergizing this division.”

Toni sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment. “That’s an interesting question, Colin, and one I find a bit difficult to answer because I have no idea what your division does.”

“Of course not. Good point. I seem to have skipped ahead a bit. Let’s see. Historically, the Division of Aesthetic Arts was chartered to create arts centers for the state’s foster children. You may be too young to remember.” Colin was improvising. “But, with the closure of the centers, the division’s mission had to evolve.”

Toni looked lost.

“Basically, I’ve been doing special projects for the past few years. Trying to, well, trying to encourage arts education for foster children. Mostly small potatoes stuff. What I’m looking for is someone with a grander vision. Someone who can think outside the box, who can create opportunities for foster families throughout the state to nurture their appreciation for the arts. What I really want is one tremendous project to jump-start this division and get us back on track.”

“Like a benefit or something.”

“Exactly.” Colin smiled expectantly.

“A benefit concert . . . for the foster children of the state,” Toni said.

“That’s the idea.”

“Like, maybe, the Beastie Boys.”

Colin frowned.

“The, um, the Rolling Stones.”

Colin’s frown deepened.

“The three tenors?”

Colin sat up in his seat. “That’s it! That’s just the kind of thing we’re looking for.”

Colin’s plan was only half formed, but it involved convincing Keaney that all of the division’s problems were the fault of Toni Ball. This would be a challenge given that Toni had only just been hired. But one big, spectacular failure by Toni could distract attention from Colin and give him more time to insinuate himself into Keaney’s good graces.

A week went by as Toni careened about the office, dancing around Colin’s flanks like a dolphin chasing a banana steamer. It took Toni only part of a day to clean out Colin’s antechamber and claim it as her own. By the end of the first week, she had reorganized the office filing system, purchased her own business cards, and fired off a stream of emails to God only knows whom about what. Toni had to have figured out that she and Colin comprised the entire sum of the Division of Aesthetic Arts, but she kept that thought to herself.

His plan in place, Colin called Keaney’s secretary, only to learn Keaney had suffered a heart attack and would be off work for at least six months. In the meantime, a management team had formed to carry on in the director’s absence. Colin felt vaguely sorry for Keaney, finally prevailing in his years-long turf war with Lumbkin only to have victory snatched away by clogged arteries. Still, the interim managers would be so busy jockeying for power that they would have no time to bother with Colin. He chuckled at the thought that Keaney’s ticker bought him another six months of retirement credits. And another six months to perfect the Toni Ball plan.

After giving Toni full rein, Colin reverted to form, the golf course. He checked in with Toni once in a while, and over time absorbed the details of her industry. Toni had set a date for the concert for early the next year, reserved a performance arena, arranged for the attendance of hundreds of foster families, lined up buses to transport the attendees, obtained volunteer musicians for the orchestra, signed up corporate sponsors, organized pre-concert entertainment, launched a massive advertising campaign, and printed and distributed thousands of flyers. The only bump in Toni’s road was her inability to book the tenors.

Colin counseled Toni to press ahead with her plans. The tenors would sign on, would have to sign on, Colin insisted, once they

realized the scope of the plan and the goodwill it would engender. Toni regularly phoned the tenors' agents. Pavarotti was booked three years in advance. Domingo two years. And Carreras might have been available but was already over-committed with charity work. So, Toni organized a letter-writing campaign—hundreds of foster families wrote to the tenors, begging their attendance. After that, the tenors' booking agents stopped taking Toni's phone calls.

January rode into town on the back of a freezing ice storm, heralding the new millennium with shattered trees, frozen power lines, and impassable roadways. Colin felt elated. Keaney was due back in a week. Toni's benefit concert was scheduled for the week after that. And the event was destined to be a resounding fiasco.

Colin found Toni slumped at her desk.

"Hey, cheer up! There's still time for them to commit."

"Are you off your nut, Colin? Pavarotti's in Italy, Domingo's in Spain, and God knows where Carreras is holed up. They're not coming."

"Maybe it would help if I made a few phone calls."

"Yeah, right."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I just find it a little preposterous for you to offer to help when I haven't even seen you in weeks, and you haven't lifted a hand to help me with this project in over six months."

"Well. Toni. It *is* your project after all. I've got my own work to do."

"Yeah, right."

"Don't forget you're on a one-year probation, young lady. If I snap my fingers, you'll be back across the street, regaling the tourists with outlandish lies."

"Go ahead and snap. My life ends a week from next Friday anyway."

Colin made sure he was front and center at Keaney's back-to-work reception, and that Toni's name had been left off the reception invitation list. At an opportune moment, Colin sidled over to Keaney to tell him about the upcoming benefit concert, the single-handed project of his assistant, Toni Ball.

"You mean to say she's actually booked the three tenors?" Keaney said. "I'm a huge fan. Huge!"

"In that case, I insist that you and your wife join me, front row center, at the concert Friday night."

Colin feared Keaney might seize again, he turned so red in his enthusiasm. The final piece of the Toni Ball puzzle slipped into place. He prepared to offer Toni false sympathy as the week progressed, but Toni's mood had shifted from panic to a serenity induced by hopelessness.

The big night finally arrived. The airways screeched with the news of the small capital town's amazing coup. The Three Tenors. The greatest assemblage of vocal cords in the history of the world, performing, for free, in a benefit for foster kids. Toni Ball ran the operations center like a field marshal. Vendors were situated. Buses unloaded. Musicians arranged. Lights focused. Sound systemed. And, a limousine dispatched to the airport, just in case one of the tenors actually appeared.

Colin caught an occasional glimpse of Toni issuing orders into a walkie-talkie. He felt a sudden pang of remorse, and at one point approached her, but turned away when he saw her mascara was streaked from crying. Toni was shrieking into the walkie-talkie, "I'm flying into a hurricane here, and you just killed my starboard motor."

Colin retreated to the arena's main entrance to meet and greet comrades from the department. Herds of foster families streamed past him into the arena. When Colin found Keaney and his wife, he led them to their seats of honor in the front row. The concert started late, with Toni's all-volunteer symphony orchestra launching into a medley of pops hits. Eventually the conductor ascended the stage and announced he'd just been informed that the tenors were having transportation problems, but he begged the audience to bear with him and meantime the band would play on.

Keaney shot Colin an anxious look. After another fifteen minutes, Keaney leaned toward Colin.

"You sure the tenors are actually booked?"

"Absolutely," Colin lied. "Toni Ball assured me this very afternoon they left together on a flight from London."

Another thirty minutes passed and the crowd grew noticeably restless. Keaney fidgeted in his seat, occasionally glancing irritably in Colin's direction. The orchestra began playing "The Star-Spangled Banner." Some in the audience stood up immediately, while others rose slowly, unsure whether to remain standing. Colin looked back over the crowd and thought people in the back were beginning to leave.

The orchestra stopped playing, and the conductor climbed to the stage again.

“I’m very sorry,” he said. “I’ve just been informed that there’s been a problem with a connecting flight.”

The audience moaned. Keaney stood up.

“I’ve got a busy schedule tomorrow,” Keaney told Colin. “I guess we’ll be off. Have Toni Ball come see me in my office, first thing in the morning.”

Just then the conductor looked back over his shoulder. “One minute, folks,” he said before walking to the wings. He returned to the stage, a smile across his face, and descended into the orchestra pit. After a pause, the violin section eased into a slow, sweeping Puccini tune. The flutes responded trippingly, challenging the violins for control of the melody.

“Uh oh,” Colin said aloud.

The audience reacted in confusion. Some began to applaud. Others stood, staring at the stage. In a moment, the audience erupted into a screaming, cheering, applauding mass. A large, balding man with a messy black beard strolled onto the stage, crooning “*recondita armonia*,” already mopping at his brow with a handkerchief.

“di bellezze diverse!

E’ bruna Floria,

l’ardente amante mia.”

The crowd screamed so loudly Colin could barely hear Pavarotti. This was impossible. He had checked the tenors’ performance schedules on the internet that very morning. Pavarotti was at the Venice Opera; one of the Spaniards was in Madrid, the other in Belgrade of all places. Colin peered hard at the singer, thinking he was a little too fat, and too short maybe, to be the real tenor.

“Tu azzurro hai l’occhio,

Tosca ha l’occhio nero.”

Keaney jumped up and down next to Colin. Pavarotti had moved to the apron of the stage, an arm’s length from Colin. He came to the song’s final verse. Just as he hit the high note, elongating “*Tosca*” into twenty piercing, reverberating syllables, his Spanish sidekicks strolled onto the stage behind him. Colin, a stranger to rock concerts, had never witnessed such pandemonium. The audience rose to its feet, screaming in adulation. Colin slumped into his chair, glancing from tenor to tenor. Maybe, just maybe, that was really Domingo, but no way that was Carreras, and anyone could tell the Pavarotti was an impersonator.

The concert, brilliant but brief, ended suddenly when Domingo explained that, unfortunately, he and his comrades must

hurry to make their flight. As the lights rose, and the crowd began to file out, Toni Ball appeared. Colin mouthed, “What the hell?” but Toni just shrugged and smiled. A weight on his heart, Colin introduced her to Keaney, who actually hugged her. Colin’s head swum. He felt a sudden shortness of breath. As he stooped to find his seat, he heard Keaney telling Toni, “And make sure you have Colin bring his files with him tomorrow. I’m positively dazzled by your work, Toni, but I’d like to see what Colin’s been up to lately.”