

**UNIVERSITY OF RETALIATION
BY LIONEL BACHMAN**

Forward

I entered into a settlement agreement with the University of Retaliation, and am not allowed to discuss the settlement amount, terms, or negotiation. However, I refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement. While the University of Retaliation can't say anything negative about me, I can share some stories of what really happened with you...

Whether you're a student, staff, or just a curious bystander, the "University of Retaliation" recounts three unusual stories of sexual harassment, discrimination and retaliation in higher education. Stories based on first-hand experiences, EEOC charges, and related lawsuits with a pinch of artistic license. Cautionary tales of how a university ultimately destroyed a once sterling reputation, and became the face of sexual harassment in higher education. Featured in Time magazine's 'People of the Year' issue, the distinction was also solidified by the negative national media attention, student protests, hunger strikes, a boycott by more than 400 other universities and colleges professors, and now this tome.

All set during a period of great uncertainty - a pandemic, black lives matter, economic collapse, looming war with China, protests and riots.

But there is an objective – a reason for sharing these stories - more than just reopening fresh wounds.

Regardless of the all the damage, the university continues to ignore calls for change – even breaking promises to implement reforms outlined by their own internal investigation and special committee. Instead, they focus of costly litigation, secret and public payouts, as well as ignoring any meaningful change.

Contributing to the problem, the government agency responsible for sexual harassment and discrimination complaints - the EEOC - takes on less than one in eighty thousand cases. Less than one in eighty thousand. How does that fix the problem? It doesn't. Designed to fail, the lack of oversight emboldens those that don't respect the law - effectively allowing them to ignoring any real accountability. The results have led to the recent outcry, public attention, and 'MeToo' movement - but no real change.

The machine continues to turn, not missing a beat – leaving in its wake damaged people, damaged lives. It's time to take the machine out...

Sincerely,



Lionel Bachman

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Beside a twisted gray river bearing the name of a local brewery lay the ivy covered Greek revival buildings making up the expansive campus of the *University of Retaliation*.

Considered one of America's leading universities in the Northeast - along with it's world renowned 'Kodak School of Music' and prestigious 'Pungent Medical Center'. The century-old University of Retaliation is also the area's largest employer. Thousands of people are educated, employed, and even healed on their campus and medical center. Unfortunate, many of those experiences aren't positive. Among those thousands, more than a few people have been sexually harassed, experienced discrimination, and were retaliated against by the university if they dared to complain. This is some of their stories...

"Before you report sexual harassment" was the subject line of the email sent to the entire campus one October afternoon. An email from a frustrated employee, back pressed against the wall, sent weeks before an avalanche of similar stories began to emerge from the shadows. The first shot fired in a battle that was about to go nuclear.

Chapter 1: Smoking Potpourri

#WreckingCrew#

On a cold dark rainy fall evening, a tall suited employee of the university leaves a meeting on the opposite side of campus from his small windowless office. The green ivy that grew in abundance on the aging statuesque buildings making up the university had started to wilt as the dropping temperatures hinted of a harsh winter ahead.

The employee, a cagey auditor named Paul Holdan, patiently waits for a break in the downpour. Without an umbrella, or raincoat, he was trapped protecting the uncovered mound of papers he was hauling around. Papers that made up his field work, including notes, sensitive internal documents, and some very unusually anomalies.

Growing up not far from the university, very much in its shadow, I was aware of the university's reputation – accepting only a few select candidates with stellar grades, obsessive participation in extra-curricular activities, and the deep pockets to afford their lofty tuition rates. It was synonymous with success, and anyone going there was considered likely to be a success.

The university was one of the few placing in this half of the state with a medical program - linked to a large well-known hospital. Together, Pungent Hospital and the university generated billions of dollars in research grants with the government. In the forties, there were even grants that included dousing unsuspecting health patients with large doses of gamma radiation. Didn't make any hulks, but did kill a bunch of people. Before that, there was it's founding presidents rule barring black students – and the profiling of black students in the nineties. A long and dark history revealing an unmistakable pattern.

There was even an elite school of music, consider by many as the best one in the world.

The university even competed with Yale and Harvard, not only in sports, but also in academia. The University of Retaliation was one of the few "complete packages" in Higher Ed – old, well respected, and huge.

Me, a state university graduate with dyslexia and a bad haircut, was working for what many considered the finest, most prestigious employer in the area, if not the entire United States. A round peg in a square hole. To work in such a well-respected place, with good pay and education opportunities, I considered myself lucky.

The unusually sensitive information included discrepancies involving more than 90 million dollars in government grants. Discrepancies that troubled the diligent thirty something year old more than the inclement weather. Especially problematic considering the grants involved protecting participant's protected personal healthcare information. The previous reviews seemed to be structured to purposefully avoid identifying problems, cursory at best in terms of the actual due diligence performed. Some systems weren't even reviewed, although the grants specifically required them. Worse, the Director of Audit, a Certified Public Accountant, false reported to both the board and government that an entire annual review had been performed – but hadn't. An important annual review required by the terms of the grants, designed to protect participant's private information. 90 million reasons to follow the rules. Reviews to protect grant participant's personal health information. 90 million reasons not to let the truth ever see light.

"It was one of the deadliest professions", I often told others when explaining my job. The old cautionary tale of 'being the bearer of bad news' or the other career trajectory related phrase 'killing the messenger' exemplified the reality often facing an auditor.

Paul had escaped the treacherous cubicle jungle at several highly regulated banks and a karma depleting "non-profit" Blue Crossed Blue (tax) Shelter healthcare insurance franchise. He was tired of jumping through hoops, sixty hour weeks, and relentless dodging office politics. He was looking for something different, something less stressful – but with an income he could survive on. A difficult task in the weak employment landscape of modern America. Higher education seemed like the answer - an environment different from that of any of his former employers. The university also happened to be less of a drive.

You always had to be on your toes - trying to navigate the shifting landscape while also attempting to maintain a hold on objectivity. Wise auditors know that the truth will always surface in one audit or another – increasing the emphasis on being as objective as possible. The truth was unstoppable, unescapable. I knew from experience that future auditors performing the same work would find anything that wasn't true. This popular ideology among auditors – the inability to hide the truth - led to the common auditor phrase "it is what it is."

It was the shortcoming of auditors that contributed to Enron, Bernie Madoff, the financial meltdown of 2007, and countless other economic train wrecks. Often, when a significant problem was encountered, tremendous pressure would be applied to minimize the appearance of risk. Especially when the problem could negatively impact the career of someone in power.

Auditors were like a speedometer, thermostat, or other measuring devices. A good auditor provides an accurate, un-bias and objective measurement. Unfortunately, audit was a profession where being too objective, or ethically un-bias, could dramatically shorten your shelf-life. To hide mistakes, protect their employment, or both, influential management sometimes pressured weak auditors to remove or downplay critical findings.

But truth is unstoppable. The hammer of divine justice. It always surfaces— regardless of management's attempts to hide, ignore, or obfuscate things. Sometime in the future, a new employee, manager, or auditor would stumble upon the problem. A decision would have to be made – and more often than not things just disappear. This skewed objectivity is what doomed many organizations, and the lack of adequate whistle blower protection in the US ensured it would continue -and eventually happen again, and again, and again. It was just another example of the unhealthy relationship between the government and big business.

At first, Paul's manager seemed harmless - even quaint. Like that crazy but lovable aunt you only see on the holidays, or that personable coworker with weird conspiracy theories. Typically harmless. However, after a few months of harmless babble, she moved onto badmouthing the former employees in Paul's current position. Regarding people she previously managed...

One was young, ambitious and stupid she commented. Another was older, combative and stupid. She claimed the younger coworker wanted her job, and the older – who was the previous manager – had dementia and his writing didn't even make sense. She said his writing appeared as though he was trying to write a children's book – something about puppies, ducks, and such. It sounded like he had lost his mind, or at least, that's how she coldly described him. Often adding that she occasionally went to dinner with him and his wife – laughing that he was still looking for a job.

Paul's initial impression of a competent but quirky professional quickly evolved into that of a crude, racist gossip monger, who was also clever and convincing. Her fanciful stories couldn't help him from wondering when his turn would come for her to call him a middle-aged, stupid, state school graduate, or some other derogatory attributes. With a weak economy, poor job market, and previous experience seeing how people who complained to HR were often treated, Paul tried to keep his head down and focused on work. But it wasn't the former coworker gossip that bothered him most, it was the repetitive question she asked almost weekly that was unsettling.

"Did you just hear that?" she frantically asked after entering Paul's office once afternoon. The same repetitive question, over and over again.

Enter Beatrice White. Legally named "Betty White", Beatrice hated any association with the 'golden girl' actress sharing her actual legal name. To distance herself, she insisted she be called Beatrice, and became hostile with anyone who accidentally or unintentionally called her Betty. Ironically, she actually looked like the famous actress in her prime – under five feet tall and sporting platinum white hair. Often wearing dated semi-formal even gowns to work, Beatrice had been with the university almost as long as the 70's orange and sage furniture littering the campus. Regardless of her quarks, Beatrice knew the university well – all the gossip and dysfunction – as well as the underground passages connecting university buildings. It was those comments that came to mind as Paul tried to wait out the rain.

Earlier that day, a conversation regarding the government grant discrepancies with his manager had only made things worse. The manager avoided providing any rational explanation for the problems, missing content, or why internal department policies and procedures were not being followed. Even worse, almost as a distraction, the manager made suddenly made a racist comment.

"I thought you could teach a chimpanzee to schedule meetings," she said, referring to an administrative assistant of color as a primate that hadn't reserved a room for an upcoming meeting. An escalation from the racist comments about perceived foreign or ethnically different workers stealing American jobs. Once uttered, the comments quickly became more common. Privately it was chimpanzees, apes, or monkeys – but in the presence of others the code word was "city people". Uncomfortable with her comment, Paul politely asked her to stop. But it was going to get worse, much worse.

In a weak economy, mad maxing it to find decent jobs was exhausting. Jumping from one closing, right-sizing, or re-organizing (layoff) company to another. He was scared to take in further. Take it up the chain of command. Report her heinous comments. It wasn't just him he worried about. He had a family. He'd hit rock bottom before. Worse, at her insistence, Beatrice had just given him a stellar review that lead to a promotion and new title. He felt obliged to ignore her behavior, and coached himself into believing he would correct her comments. Make things right. Not rock the boat.

Dressed in a brown twill suit, the cagey auditor quickly descended the concrete steps to the basement of the Liberal Arts building to access the university's subterranean labyrinth. Lined with utility pipes and communication cable in varying sizes, the narrow cinder-block passages had a smooth concrete floor marked with colored lines indicating the path to different campus destinations. The colored lines made it easy for him to find his way back to Orange Hall.

Beside the water lines, heating ducts, and power lines, I could still spot the network cables – the communication highway for the entire campus. Miles of copper CAT5 wires used by thousands of students and staff to access university and hospital resources - as well as to the outside internet and countless information security threats.

But that wasn't all that traversed that copper, students often chalk marked frequently used campus sidewalks with server IPs that would temporarily appear on the network. The IPs to rogue servers housed pirated movies, music, and software – setup so anyone could add or copy files but not delete existing ones. It was strange to see files of movies still in theaters, recently released songs, and licensing keys for extremely expensive graphic art tools all over the place. A hub of stolen intellectual property. The university had no idea who owned the hubs, or almost half of the servers active in their network, which was difficult to think about considering they reside alongside university and hospital servers. Servers containing student records, patient's medical information, and other sensitive data. It was a mess – a mess no one dared discuss or document. It was rumored that mentioning it was the fastest way to get fired.

Walking along the dimly lit underground corridor, the rhythmic sound of Paul's leather soled shoes on the concrete path were suddenly drowned out by the distant scream of a woman.

Seemingly out of place at the time, Beatrice's frequent question followed the scream - "Did you just hear that?"

Paul froze trying to determine what direction the scream had come from. Did it come from behind him or the path ahead? The initial scream was quickly followed by the screams of multiple people from behind, then the shuffled almost frantic sound of people running. Getting closer and closer. Beneath the screams, Paul could hear a distinct and consistent muffled popping sound. A rhythmic sound repeated –

pop, pop, pop. An automatic rifle with a silencer he initially thought, recounting recent news stories about mass shootings as he frantically found a small space between two vending machines to hide.

“Did you just hear that?”

As the sounds approach, he prayed for the best while nervously contemplating what object around him he could grab to defend himself if the opportunity arose. But there wasn't anything useful in the area, just a wall mounted fire extinguisher and an empty waste paper basket beside the soda machine. Peering around the edge of the vending machine, he could see the dancing shadows of people approaching.

But what was I hearing? Was it a domestic terrorist act or a disgruntled student or staff member? I had no idea, just as I had no idea of what Beatrice's wanted me to hear.

The immediate threat quickly revealed itself - a group of students chasing another student carrying a nerf gun raced passed Paul. It wasn't a shooting, just zombies. Humans vs. Zombies to be specific, a game students playing using Nerf guns that wasn't around when Paul was in college. He remembered another auditor mentioning students interrupting a meeting playing the game, and this was the first time Paul had seen the campus wide game in play. Humans carry nerf guns to temporarily stop “zombies” changes them, usually only providing a five minute delay, the remaining humans tried desperately to avoid being touched by a zombie. Any contact with the undead would turn a human. While zombies don't have nerf guns, their eventual masses easily overcame the human's finite nerf bullets and dwindling numbers. Flight is often the only way to dodge a pack of aggressive zombies.

It had been almost ten years since Paul had been on a campus, and it was obvious things had changed. In his college days, most recreational activities revolved around pool, cards, or foos ball – often as part of drinking games or personal challenge. Nerf Humans vs. Zombies seemed like fun - chasing other students around an enormous university - even if it didn't involve drinking. While he survived the strange zombie encounter, and even the embarrassment of a few students chuckling at him hiding between the vending machine, the real craziness was about to begin.

Returning to Orange Hall, Paul found a distraught Beatrice leaving the director's office.

“Did you just hear that? I was just sexually harassed.”

#HydeTheJekyll#

In an affluent neighborhood within walking distance of the campus, a professor at the University of Retaliation hosts a get together with students at his sprawling Victorian home. The professor, Dr. Frances Keggar, was a relatively young - late thirty year old - tenured faculty member of the prestigious Caenum Cranial Sciences Department. It was well-known throughout the campus and academia that Dr. Keggar was influential – influential for bringing significant research grants – aka money – to the perpetually dollar hungry university.

Considered a rock star within the department, or at least as close as a traditionally stuffy professor could come to cool, he projected a dashing profile that influenced university management, peers, and students. Dressed in trendy clothing the young professor instructed both graduate and undergraduate

students. Some of those students, selected by Dr. Keggar, formed a small loyal chic of his favorites – effectively dividing his undergraduate and graduate students into an ‘in’ group and outcasts. This small but effective group helped Professor Keggar further his professional and social objectives by dangling favoritism, privilege, and the related advantages. Advantages that often meant success, or failure, in the highly competitive and demanding Intrinsic Mind Sciences program.

My parents always warned me that people aren’t always who they pretend to be. Most serial killers, pedophiles, and other predators look like a friendly neighbor until they’re arrested and the truth comes out. Epstein, the Subway guy, and Cosby all looked relatively normal from the outside. Inside were sick and twisted monsters that preyed upon the vulnerable. A judging a book by its cover sort of thing. Regardless, it was still shocking and scary to encounter a monster. No matter how convincing – in outward appearance or public pleasantries - Keggar was a monster.

A conventional educational discussion isn’t on the good profession’s agenda for the evening. Instead, the meeting consists of his trolls bullshitting about Dr. Keggar’s numerous embellished accomplishments, drinking beer, smoking synthetic weed, and dips in a hot tube on the back porch.

The mid-nineteenth century pre-civil war mansion had been renovated in the mid-seventies for use as the office public safety before being sold to the public. However, the historic house never actually passed into “public” hands. Owned by a string of distinguished university professors, the odd old house was mixture of the past and future. Sitting above the fireplace in the living room, beside a large flat panel TV mounted to the wall, was a portrait of the home’s first owner and first president of the university. The bearded quant looking president was as much a religious nut as a racist – staunchly refusing to allow black American to attend the university. While the aging static oil paint and dancing light-emitting diodes perfectly illustrated change, the university’s current leadership was just as backwards and behind the times as its founders were.

From the outside, Dr. Keggar looked like a successful aging hipster wearing trend clothing and Chuck Taylors. Trend haircut and unassuming horn rimmed glasses. But the external image was only a mask hiding the monster inside. The more I got to know Keggar, the more his persona melted away. The most noticeable was his constant sexual comments – usually about a student in his classroom or a female he just met.

Sitting on the floor of her upstairs bedroom, back against a thin plywood door, one graduate student tries to ignore the loud party raging in the rest of the house around her. For financial reasons, Sidney Charlotte had reluctantly agreed to rent a room in the home of her professor while completing her graduate studies. At the time, it was the only option the struggling student had to continue her studies, and Dr. Keggar seemed relatively normal at the time. It wasn’t until she began living with Professor Keggar’s that she started to realize her instincts were right. Very right, if not dead-on right.

At first noticing slight changes in the intonation of his voice when talking about women, repetitive sexually demeaning comments about their bodies, and completely ignoring countless request to stop doing it. He even laughed when I asked him to stop, as he enjoyed knowing I knew we was degrading his own students with sexual comments about their bodies.

Dr. Keggar was fixated on sex - constantly flirting with his female undergraduate and graduate students - as well as continually making crude sexual comments about their anatomy. It wasn't long until she found out Keggar was having sex with his undergraduate and graduate students, as well as potential students, that she knew she had to leave asap. Some she witnessed, some she heard about from peers shocked she was living at Keggar's home, and others she later found out were common knowledge around campus. When Keggar started make inappropriate sexual comments to her, and then threatening to ruin her career if she complained, she realized that she had effectively become a prisoner in his house - constantly hiding to avoid the monster. Little did she know at the time, more than a half dozen complaints from other professors and students, including the department chair, couldn't stop Keggar.

It was Keggar's world - and anyone that came into it's orbit was subject to his whims. He loved to talk about all the parties, called the "Hot Tube Times" that the old house had hosted. More importantly, he loved to say he was bringing the good times back. All the drugs, all the dibochery, and how tenured professors were gods - students mere mortals. I was a mortal, and he reminded me that every morning when he complained about my showers.

"Charlotte, it just a matter of conserving resource. Saving the plant."

"Frances, I told you a million times, I am not taking showers with you. Period."

He hated being called Frances. Simply saying it, somehow always caused him to pause. But that's all he did, pause for a few minutes before continuing his endless sexual ramblings. Might have been what his parent screamed at him when he was bad, and I can imagine him being bad. He was sick, relentless, and the only way to escape his abuse was to avoid him. Hide from the person responsible for your education, your future, your life. A nightmare existence.

After hours of partying, minutes before midnight, the music and noise from the party abruptly stopped. The entire house became completely quiet. Another overdose? She had heard a female student had a seizure in the hot tub after smoking the fragrant K2 synthetic THC. She had to go to the emergency room, ICU, or something like that. Unsure what happened, or was about to happen, Charlotte sat up and looked out her bedroom window. No one had left - the cars were still parking in the driveway, some on the lawn, and no one was exiting the house.

"I have an announcement to make!"

Everyone likes a good party, but this gather wasn't about having a good time. The week before an ambulance had to be called for a student who OD'd in the hot tub. Some toxic mixture of alcohol, pills, and synthetic marijuana. Keggar's focus wasn't academic pursuits, but women and partying. He often proudly claimed to others that he was bringing back hot tube parties to the university. What had she gotten herself into?

"Is Jill ready for the Intrinsic Sciences graduate program?" Keggar asked to his roomful of followers, who started clapping and congratulating Jill.

Jill nervously looked around the room as if trying to determine the best escape route. It was obvious she wasn't comfortable with the situation.

“Spin around for us” Keggar commanded, while twirling his finger at her. Obviously wanting her to show everyone her body.

“Come one, spin around!” He repeated impatiently with a hint of anger. Without a word, she reluctantly spun around as the followers howled and hooted.

Opening the door to her room a crack to see what was happening; Charlotte watched Keggar escort Jill by the hand to his bedroom and closed the door. Charlotte couldn’t help but wonder if it was the vague promises of being accepted into the program, abundance of alcohol and drugs, or the hype from his zealot stooges that had actually lured Jill into his bedroom. Regardless, Charlotte knew it wouldn’t take long for his newest conquest to be tossed aside and forgotten like the others. The university looked the other way, discounted numerous complaints, and failed to do anything meaningful to protect students. The monster was always hungry for a new conquest and nothing stood in his way.

He enjoyed torturing people, and knew he could get away with it. The last straw, for me, was when he threw out all my food. It just disappeared one day, everything in the cupboards, in the refrigerator, and freezer. All my carefully budgeted food for the month. Gone. When confronted, the pompous ass told me he had tossed everything to help me. Insisting that I was becoming a little piggy, and I had to keep my girlish figure to find a decent suitor. I was beyond the point of think it was me, beyond the point of even entertaining his crazy logic to justify his actions, beyond being scared of his threats to ruin my career if I complained. I couldn’t just think of myself anymore, it was about all the women – student, staff, and who knows who else - he abused.

Just outside France’s bedroom door, the followers quietly wait, muffling their giggles, and listening for confirmation – the sound of Frances having loud sex with Jill - before restarting the music and party. It was another weekend at France’s, and if history was again repeated, it was probably the last anyone would see or hear of Jill. Another dream crushed by the University of Retaliation.

Nohl Phalemen

On a campus sidewalk, in front of the steps leading to the office of the University of Retaliation’s president, a group of maintenance workers diligently remove spray paint from the concrete. Evidence of the mounting tension on campus, frustrated students had scrawled demands for president’s resignation. Phalemen must go! No Confidence! Fire Keggar!

Standing beside a window in his spacious mahogany line office, dressing in a well-tailored three piece suit, Dr. Nohl Phaleman calmly sips coffee while watching the workers scrape off the graffiti. The spray paint had appeared the day after it had becomes public knowledge that the University ignored numerous calls from students, faculty, and a department chair to remove a professor accused of sexual harassment. Always considering himself the smartest person in any room, he naively ignored the warning.

But it wasn’t just the spray painted demands he was ignoring, he was also ignoring the emerging MeToo movement and related recent events. Each day the crowds of angry students grew, and each day Dr. Phaleman would tell himself that he could handle anything. Oblivious to the times, Phaleman remained confident that he can ‘manage’ any situation. Especially a group of disgruntled staff and some

undergraduates. The president had always considered himself the smartest person in any room, anywhere, and his opinion beyond reproach. His mental prowess, he deduced, could overcome anything. Typifying the difference between intelligence and wisdom – Nohl was well educated, but void of even a single molecule of wisdom.

“Dr. Phalemen, some people in the media would like to get a comment about the recent student protests and hunger strikes.” An assistant interrupts the president’s vacuous blank stare.

“Local media?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell them to make an appointment,” he responds.

It was the same responses he told anyone who tried to take him up on his bullshit “open door” propaganda. The stuff he promised parents, alumni, and students. Over the years, Phaleman had become a master of dodging people. Even more so if he thought they might be disgruntled, or be critical of his perfect judgement. He wasn’t interested in addressing problems, dissenting views, or making changes. Any changes. Requests were either ignored outright, or some ambiguous excuse was simply made up for why an appointment couldn’t be made at the time - and anytime they dared to call back. His door was always closed – unless it involved money. And if you threatened that money – or a professor with lucrative government grants – you were threatening the university.

It was all about the dollar signs. He had come from Wall Street. It just felt natural, felt right. The “Green Manalishi” he would often laughed to himself.

Green Manalishi.

GingerGuitarSlinger

Toilet paper?

Uncertain, challenging times...

Fear of the pandemic had become as contagious as the virus.

An unemployed doctorate graduate of the Kodak School of Music sped down a deserted four lane highway in a rusty old Honda. There wasn’t a car, truck, tractor trailer or person anywhere in sight during what was once the rush hour in the large northeastern American city. If anything, not seeing people or vehicles was preferred. Avoid problems. Recent news coverage included looting, robberies, and other things to avoid. One thing Ben couldn’t avoid was being black, and it wasn’t unreasonable to fear having a negative event involving the police, an angry Karen, or both. He knew not all cops were racist statistically, but he’d always felt he had bad luck. It would just be his luck to come face to face with the only white supremacist on the force. But even one racist was too many. He couldn’t deny a disproportionate number of people of color were locked up - evidence of systemic racism. There was also the very public killings of Trayvon, Floyd and others he couldn’t ignore. Black lives mattered, including Benjamin Caulfield’s.

After the initiate hoarding frenzy, the city's three million citizens had gone into hiding to dodge the looming biological threat. The resulting ghost town had been stripped of critical supplies, making it impossible to find hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, and even toilet paper. Scarcity of critical supplies quickly began to include food, batteries, and even Ben's favorite - Pringles.

Ben's answers his ringing telephone on the empty passenger seat beside him. "Mr. Sachio?"

"Make sure you check for toilet paper."

Everything deemed non-essential, including schools, hair salons, bars, and many other businesses were shutdown to slow the spread. Also shuttered were parks, beaches, sports, entertainment events, and anywhere people might gather. Ben's part-time job playing guitar in local clubs for a few dollars was gone. Entertainment was limited to Netflix, board games, and online games. Aside from Facebook, texting, or telephone calls, the only physical interaction was with people they were quarantined with. America was closed.

"Mr. Sachio, I will check for Toilet paper. I have the list. Is there anything else we need?"

As the number of people infected and died increased, the public became more and more withdrawn. The numbers would increase and decrease, and then increase again. An exhausting rollercoaster of worry, while trying to comply with the ever changing guidance from officials. Ineffective official communications were blurred by rumor. At first everyone was told that only the old with pre-existing medical conditions would be impacted, but that proved false as mounting numbers of young and healthy died. A wildly powerful fear set in.

Unable to find a job, the summer before the pandemic, Ben had started painting houses to make ends meet. It was while painting houses that he had met an older Japanese gentleman named Dr. Hashida Sachio. His large stately home was for sale, and a fresh coat of paint had been recommended by his realtor. Dr. Sachio was a retired rocket scientist and 8th Dan Japanese Judo sensei whose wife had recently passed away.

"TOILET PAPER!" Hashida yelled, emphasizing their need for the elusive paper product.

Dr. Sachio's plan was to selling his house and returning to Japan to visit his old haunts one last time – then retire in Arizona with his daughter. When the exterior of the house was painted, Mr. Sachio had kindly offered Ben a room during the winter in exchange for completing odd jobs and repairs needed to secure the sale. There was only one stipulation. If-when the house was sold, Ben would have to go. A strange stipulation considering that Ben's work would contribute to his future homelessness, but he was happy to find work. It wasn't a karate kid relationship - Dr. Hashida wasn't training Ben in judo. For now, it was nice to have a warm place to go. And Ben's couldn't deny that the old Japanese gentleman's wisdom had impressed him. Dr. Hashida's mind was impressive, both for his vast knowledge of history as well as current events. When the pandemic arrived, Dr. Hashida's lack of a driver's license made Ben critical for buying groceries and supplies.

"I'll treat you to Pringles Ben, just remember to look for toilet paper."

Social distancing, quarantines, and face masks had changed everything. Ironically, the culture that had long ignored sexual assault and harassment victims before the MeToo movement had become fixated with on physical isolation, social distancing and quarantines.

One recent Dr. Sachio story was stuck in Ben's head. When Ben shared what had happen to him at the Kodak School of Music, Dr. Sachio recounted one time he had been discriminated against.

In the early 1970's, while his wife looked for their dinner guests at an exclusive restaurant, he had gone to the bar to wait for them. At the bar, two younger men wearing military uniforms noticed the well-dressed Japanese gentleman, and decided to loudly retell a barbaric story of their time in Vietnam.

One raised his voice to ensure Hashida could hear every word. "I said to Bob – I bet I can shoot the basket off the head of that chink woman walking along some rice patties about 30 clicks out."

"30 clicks out?" The other responded in sarcastic disbelief, giggling at the risky challenge.

"Yeah, 30 clicks out. Bob said – I bet you can't do it. He said I couldn't do it. So, I raised my rifle, took aim, and BOOM!"

"What happened?"

Taking another sip of his beer, the man stared directly at Hashida before finally replying. "Blew her fucking head right off. Blew it clean off. Yup, Bob was right, I couldn't hit that basket."

Both men laughed as they waited for Hashida to response to their gruesome sick tale. Hashida denied them any emotion, and patiently staring back at them – waiting for them to make the first move. A Judo master and future Olympic Judo Referee, it would be easy for him to beat both of them senseless – if they had an sense. But Dr. Sachio said he wouldn't let them lower himself to their level – to lose his honor to fools. We was better than that...a better human.

Before the clueless soldiers could escalate things, Dr. Sachio's wife appeared with their guests – her father the commanding general of the nearby military base. The facial expressions of both men immediately changed when they realized their error. More so when the general noticed the men, and introduced Dr. Sachio as his son-in-law – calling him the finest man he knows. Their obnoxious laughter quickly went silent as fear set in.

"Like they say, karma is a bitch" Dr. Sachio laughed.

Illustration #1



Betty "Beatrice" White

Illustration #2



Ginger Guitar Slinger