

The Naming Committee

by Tom Smith

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CHARACTERS

Ellen 40s, a history professor, any ethnicity
Josh 20, college student, any ethnicity

TIME/PLACE

Today
A college campus

THE NAMING COMMITTEE

ELLEN

So...

JOSH

So.

ELLEN

Meeting number five in two weeks. No snacks this time.

(Josh doesn't react.)

Well, we both know why we're here.

JOSH

The provost said we had to compromise.

ELLEN

Come to consensus, was what she said. She needs our decision today.

JOSH

Consensus.

ELLEN

Yes.

JOSH

Which can only happen if one of us compromises.

ELLEN

Not if one of us changes our mind.

JOSH

You mean me.

ELLEN

Yes!

(He stares at her.)

I'm kidding! I'm kidding.

(He says nothing.)

Let's just review the policy again.

JOSH

You teach History.

That's right. ELLEN

European History. JOSH

Uh-huh. ELLEN

Then I'm thinking you weren't really kidding.
(He stares at her.) JOSH

What are you majoring in, Josh? I don't think I know. ELLEN

Finance. JOSH

That's right! ELLEN

Are you tenured? JOSH

Yeah. ELLEN

How long have you worked here? JOSH

Almost 17 years. ELLEN

Did you volunteer for this? JOSH

For what? The committee?
(He nods.) ELLEN
I did, actually. I've served on it for ten years.

JOSH

So you like it then.

ELLEN

I do.

JOSH

What do you like about it?

ELLEN

I don't know... I mean, truthfully? I like that we only have to meet once or twice a year.

JOSH

Except for this year.

ELLEN

This year is an exception.

JOSH

Because of me.

ELLEN

Not necessarily. It's just the first time we've ever deadlocked.

JOSH

Usually, things just pass on through.

ELLEN

No, of course not. I mean, some do, I guess. Most. But not everything.

JOSH

What was the last thing that got denied?

ELLEN

Oh, God... The pool! About four or five years ago. That didn't go through.

JOSH

Why was that?

ELLEN

Because the land that was given turned out not to be worth what the donor said it was.

JOSH

So it was a financial reason?

ELLEN

Yes. So they got something else instead. I can't remember what.

JOSH

Is that the only one that ever got turned down?

ELLEN

In my time, yeah. I mean, we have policies. If we follow them and people meet the requirements, they get passed through.

JOSH

And these policies were created by...?

ELLEN

I don't know. Long before my time. Advancement, probably. The President. I'm sure Legal signed off on them.

JOSH

So white cisgender men from twenty or thirty years ago.

ELLEN

I don't know.

JOSH

Sure you do. You ever see any other faces in those photos in the library? This place ever have an Asian president? Latina?

ELLEN

No.

JOSH

No, it hasn't. The country had a black president for eight years but never this place.

ELLEN

Look, I've got an advising appointment at 4. We should really talk about—

JOSH

The courtyard, yeah. We wouldn't want the Millers to—

ELLEN

—Morlans—

JOSH

Morlans to think we're ungrateful for their very generous donation. To quote the provost.

ELLEN

Policy says our committee has to come to consensus.

JOSH

Then there should be three of us.

ELLEN

Dr. McGuire is on personal leave and no one thought to replace him because...

JOSH

Because everything always just gets passed through.

ELLEN

Not always. Just usually.

JOSH

Only this time, trying to do what's right is slowing things down.

ELLEN

There are policies that we have to work under, Josh. And they clearly state that as long as the donor provides the gift in full, that the value of the gift is clearly defined, and that the gift doesn't in any way damage the reputation of the university that the naming committee must recommend approval.

JOSH

I'm not asking to ignore policy.

ELLEN

Then why are we here for the fifth time?

JOSH

Because this gift will damage this university. Irrevocably.

ELLEN

That's not true. You don't want to approve the Morlans' gift simply because their politics contradict your own.

JOSH

Not just mine. A majority of this student body. What this institution stands for. The Morlans supported organizations that aggressively worked against marriage equality. They support politicians who deny basic human rights. Their own company exploits workers to the degree that—

ELLEN

It doesn't.

JOSH

It uses loopholes to avoid paying healthcare! They spent more money trying to suppress the minimum wage increase than if they just would have paid their workers a living wage.

ELLEN

That's not the whole story.

JOSH

You're right, it's not. They also fired the whistleblowers who brought their corruption to light.

ELLEN

They eventually settled every single one of those—

JOSH

They use foreign factories to avoid taxes, support deporting undocumented workers. You think that's all ok? What they do, who they support?

ELLEN

Of course I don't! But it's not up to—

JOSH

Then why are you so willing to accept their blood money?

ELLEN

You don't have to like—

JOSH

This courtyard is in the center of campus! You want the entire freshman class to get their picture in "The Morlan Courtyard?" You want campus tour guides to explain to potential students and their parents who these people were?

ELLEN

We don't have to like it. But we also can't say no simply because we disagree with their beliefs. That's the weight of democracy. They didn't break any laws—

JOSH

Are you serious!?!

ELLEN

They've never been convicted. So that doesn't meet our definition of—

JOSH

So you're saying, in the eyes of this fine institution—in your eyes—that their money is just as green as anyone else's.

ELLEN

This isn't a financial consideration. For me, I mean. I don't even consider that when we're—

JOSH

What are you talking about? It's all about money!

ELLEN

It's not! For the school: of course. But not for this committee.

JOSH

This committee is part of the school. We approve naming things: buildings, offices, labs. Things that will be around long after you and I are both gone. This committee memorializes people. Why? Because they were good? Because they made the world a better place? No. Because they had the money. So don't say this isn't a financial consideration. It's only financial.

ELLEN

For me, is what I said. I don't concern myself with how money factors into any of this. It's not like it's going to affect me one way or another anyway.

JOSH

The Morlans' money is going somewhere.

ELLEN

Well, not to the department of History or my paycheck, that much I can tell you.

JOSH

Because if it did, what? Then you'd do the right thing?

ELLEN

Naming is about honoring gifts, not people.

JOSH

One gets the other.

ELLEN

If it was solely about the money, there wouldn't even be this committee. The school would just accept every gift from every donor.

JOSH

My freshman year, my roommate majored in Dance.

ELLEN

What?

JOSH

My roommate became a Dance major. At a school that costs 46,000 dollars a year.

ELLEN

Ok, fine. What does that have to do with—

JOSH

I never even heard of that before. Majoring in Dance. Where I grew up college is supposed to get you a job. “Your degree is the key.” We talk at this university about diversity? About being in a bubble? Privilege? Privilege is knowing you can major in Dance. That that exists. Privilege is equating value with worth.

ELLEN

This decision isn’t only up to us.

JOSH

It’s entirely up to us.

ELLEN

The Regents can overrule if they want to.

JOSH

I was asked to be on this committee. And I’m not dumb: I know having a student rep is tokenism. One student, two faculty, you think the students are ever gonna win? But this semester is different. This semester there’s only two of us.

ELLEN

This building was named after a slave-owner. The Ag department is named after a farmer who exploited migrant laborers. There’s not a single building on this campus named after a woman. It’s awful, and it’s not right, but we can’t remove people from their times.

JOSH

You think we can’t find more worthy names?

ELLEN

Our course we can, but we also can’t ignore the past. Carve out and remove the uncomfortable parts. We have an obligation to both sides.

JOSH

We have an obligation to do what’s right.

ELLEN

A university is a place for freedoms, not restriction.

JOSH

A university can only keep its doors open if its welcoming to all students. If it avoids the kind of press that could lead to another budget shortfall.

(Ellen looks at him.)

The Regents won't overrule us once that's made clear.

ELLEN

So, fine, we deny this, what then? We rename everything on this campus that someone might find offensive? Erase history? Where will it stop?

JOSH

Here. It will stop right here. Because of us.

(Beat.)

We aren't erasing history. We're making it.

(Beat.)

So...?

ELLEN

So.

(They stare at each other for a long moment, each unsure who will budge first.)

END OF PLAY