

The following excerpt is taken from *Tenure Track* by Joseph Meigs.
© 2002. All Rights Reserved.

* * *

Having finished temporarily with Bwanger, Tyler decided to find Sturgeon and solicit his opinion about this Honors business. But first he wanted to grab a cup of coffee, so he detoured to the table on which rested the Departmental pot. No coffee.

Well, no matter, he thought; he'd fix it himself. He took the pot into the hall and filled it at the nearest drinking fountain, having some unexplainable prejudice against filling it in the sink in the men's room. Back in the Departmental office, he found the filters and a basket full of packets containing pre-measured bags of coffee. He selected one packet that indicated that it would yield ten cups and ripped it open with his teeth, holding the paper container with one hand and turning his head to one side like a dog tearing flesh from a bone, disregarding the perforation across the top. He then lifted the bag out and disposed of the red outside packet in the trash can beneath the coffee pot. With the torn edge still in his mouth, he suddenly realized that Bwanger was standing in the doorway, staring at him as if Tyler had just peed on the bulletin board.

"Why did you open it that way? Why didn't you tear the paper along the dotted line? It's designed to open easily that way." Bwanger seemed to be scolding Tyler.

"Well, I didn't notice any dotted lines, actually." "Here, let me show you." Bwanger began rummaging through the basket to find a packet like the one Tyler had just attacked. "Here's one; no, it's different" Finding nothing but undotted containers in the basket, he picked up the trash can and set it on the edge of the desk. "We'll just look at the one you threw in the trash."

"Hey, Dr. Bwanger, it really doesn't matter," Tyler interjected as he finished the set-up operation to produce coffee. "I know, but I just want to show you" Bwanger was elbow

deep in the marine-green can, which, unfortunately for him, had not been emptied the night before and was now full of shavings from the pencil sharpener, pieces of old sandwiches, papers (many of which were soaked with coffee poured into the can by careless professors), and some dried out and crumbling flowers. "It's got to be in here somewhere. Ah, here it is." Bwanger had the pleased look of a golfer who found his almost lost, but playable ball in a critical moment of a tournament. "See, the one you opened had perforations, these dotted lines."

Tyler briefly entertained the notion of removing the now wet coffee bag from the coffee machine and cramming it back into the packet Bwanger was holding, but chose simply to ingratiate himself to Bwanger. "Gosh, Dr. Bwanger, I can see that you certainly know your coffee bags. At any rate, I think the coffee will be ready soon. Will you be wanting any of it?"

"No, thanks, I never drink it--doctor's orders." With that he reentered his office. Tyler was tempted to take the pot, now containing approximately two cups worth of coffee, and slosh it all over Bwanger, but he figured such action would waste good coffee and right then he really could use a cup.

And he wanted it right then, not when the whole pot had filled. He took his cup in one hand and the receiving pot in his other and was just on the verge of switching the two so that he could catch the dripping coffee while he poured some of the contents of the pot into his cup, when Bwanger reappeared at his office door.

"Oh, Tyler, sometime this week let's talk about actually setting up the Honors Room."

"Sure, I'd be glad to." Tyler said this while pretending that he was merely adjusting the pot so the coffee dripped into it better, all the while rhythmically table tapping with his cup as if he were hearing a tune in his head. He actually feared that Bwanger had some office rule

forbidding this technique and would, if he knew what Tyler was doing at that moment, lecture him on how that way wastes coffee or lets liquid get on the hot plate and fry. As soon as Bwanger turned back into his office, Tyler completed the switch, filled his cup, leaving only a few drops hissing on the hot plate, and then left.

After climbing the stairs and walking to Sturgeon's office, he found Sturgeon reading *THE GREAT GATSBY*, resting comfortably in his chair, his legs propped up on his desk, his shoes planted in a pile of students' papers, all of which looked as if they needed ironing, old donuts, and a newspaper open to a crossword puzzle that had been completed, including the vertical entries, in cursive. He was wearing a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. The latter feature surprised Tyler. "Ben, hi, hey, I didn't realize you wore glasses."

"Well, yes, I wear them. I actually need them all the time since I have a good case of astigmatism, but I don't like them. I prefer to see the whole world a bit fuzzy most of the time. It makes everything look like an impressionistic painting. It's particularly nice with Christmas lights. I do wear them when reading novels or student papers, but when I'm doing that latter task, I think I'd just as soon be totally blind. Anyway, what's up?"

"Can I get your opinion—uh, comments--on something?"

"Sure."

"Bwanger has asked me to run some up-and-coming English honors program. I was curious if you knew anything about it. I told him I'd do it."

"Big mistake, Tye. It's an administrative job and you should know by now that most administrative jobs are useless. Hell, I know of one in Support Services that went unfilled long enough that people discovered it wasn't needed, but they eventually filled it anyway. This is

probably another case in which a position could go unfilled, but they'll fill it anyway. And besides, you don't fit into the Sturgeon Theory of Administrative Hiring."

"What the devil's that?"

"It's a variation of the Peter Principle, except one doesn't RISE to the level of one's incompetence; one STARTS OUT at the level of incompetence. Administrators don't want to be threatened by competent other administrators, so whenever they hire someone new, they make damned sure that the new one is incompetent. The new incompetents serve as foils, so that the old incompetents don't look as bad. It's why you should take an ugly person with you if you go cruising malls or bars to pick up a date. The ugly buddy you have will make you look better. In the administrators' case, hiring incompetents helps maintain an academic version of a kakistocracy."

Tyler guffawed at simply the sound of the word. "And pray tell, what is that?"

"It's a government run by all the worst people. And you see you're not one of the worst people--in this case one of the incompetents--so you really don't fit. They could do worse than you, but you could do a lot better than taking this on."

"Thanks for the encouragement. I was afraid you'd say this. And what's all this about 'raising the bar,' the phrase that Bwanger used?"

"Oh, it's just the President's attempt to schmooze the public into thinking we're getting better here. 'Raising the bar' is of course a metaphor from high jumping, but the only problem around here is that instead of getting people to jump higher to clear the bar, we just get a lot more people running under the bar. We have hordes of bar-challenged students and faculty. Just call them b-c's."

"Sounds logical to me, but I hope the b-c's aren't in this honors group. By the way, how long have those donuts been there?"

"I'm really not sure. Let's see." Sturgeon moved his feet just enough to be able to retrieve a broken piece of what appeared to have been a blueberry donut and popped it into his mouth. He chewed for a moment and then declared authoritatively, "I'd say no more than a week. The middle isn't completely hard yet. Want one?"

"No, of course not. How can you eat one that old?"

"Listen, my boy, it's perfectly fine. I'm the Will Rogers of the donut world--I've never met one that I didn't like. I should have been a cop I guess."

"You're disgusting, you know."

"I am for sure, but you should be a little bit more disgusting yourself--rather than carry on nonsense like this administering the Honors program, which, I assure you, will be an unpleasant form of disgusting."

* * *