

Seventy-Five Years

Michael A. Burstein

Isabel paused at the entrance of the Hart Senate Office Building. She turned southwest for a moment to take one last look at the shell of the Capitol Building. A rare Columbia District snowfall obscured her view slightly, but she could still make out the scaffolding surrounding the dome. They were saying that it wouldn't be rebuilt until the summer, half a year or so away.

She turned around, loosened her coat, and walked through the main entrance of the Hart Building. She showed her special visitor's badge to the security guards hearing the telltale hum as she passed through the one thin electronic railgate that scanned her body and briefcase. When she failed to set off any alarms, one of the guards nodded to her, and she stepped into the main atrium of the building.

She walked quickly past the Alexander Calder sculpture "Mountains and Clouds" that filled the cavernous atrium. The black aluminum sheets of the suspended "clouds" and the standing "mountains" contrasted with the white marble of the floor and walls. Many times before, Isabel had appreciated the majestic feeling the sculpture gave to the atrium. But not today. Today she had to focus on her mission, and she couldn't afford any distractions.

She entered an empty elevator, which whisked her up to the seventh floor, where Peter had his office. Not Peter, she thought. Not even Fitz. Think of him as Senator Fitzgerald. Maintain a proper level of detachment. Approach him first as a historian, not as an ex-wife.

The elevator opened, and her feet remembered the way. She felt as if she was watching her body from outside as she glided to Peter's office.

She pushed the button next to the door, and within a moment she was buzzed into the outer office. The place looked sparse. A calendar on the wall displayed today's date: Thursday, February 27, 2098.

The senator's chief of staff, James MacDonald Wills, nodded at her from behind his desk as she slid into the outer office. His blue blazer clung tightly to his slight frame.

"Hi, Jim."

"Hi, Isabel," he said, still staring at whatever images his glasses were displaying. "Give me a moment to kill the feed."

She nodded. He pushed a button on his earpiece, and his eyes focused onto her.

"What was it?"

"Nothing important." He smiled, and she understood. Whatever he had been studying was not for public consumption.

She inclined her head towards the door. "How's the old man?"

Jim shrugged. "Same as always, I suppose. He's expecting you."

"Can I go in, then?"

Jim nodded. "Sure. Although I'd love to know what this is all about."

She *looked back at Jim. "He hasn't told you?"

"Nary a peep."

She nodded. "Well, I'm sure he'll tell you eventually." She took a deep breath and pushed open the door.

#

Isabel had not been in Peter's office since the divorce, so many years ago. She recalled that it had always been a maelstrom of chaos, with handhelds, pads, and even actual papers scattered all over his desk and his chairs. So she was surprised to discover Peter sitting behind an oak desk with an uncluttered surface, upon which sat only a cup and a terminal.

She was even more surprised when she looked at Peter.

Peter's hair had long ago turned grey, and in response he had undergone depilation. His head, once covered in dark, thick hair, was now bald. She had also remembered his wrinkled face, and its current smoothness advertised the benefits of the rejuvenation therapies medical science had developed within the last ten years. Isabel had last seen Peter up close ten years ago, but today he looked not ten years older, but many more years younger.

"Hello, Senator," she said.

"Hello, Isabel. It's been a long time, but you can still call me Peter." He inclined his head, and a chair slid towards Isabel. As she settled herself into it, he reached for his cup and took a sip.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good. I'm glad you wanted to come see me."

"That's crap, and you know it," she replied after only a moment's hesitation.

Peter paused with the cup halfway back to the desk. "Pardon me?"

"Peter, cut the geniality for the moment. I know as well as you do how much pull it took for me to arrange this meeting."

He put the cup back down and shrugged. "You haven't changed, Isabel. You're still as blunt as ever." He rubbed his eyes. "Fine. I resent this meeting and I have no interest in talking to you. Are you going to do me the favor of leaving now?"

"No, I'm not. I'm going to have my say."

He smiled. "Have your say, then. It's not going to change anything."

"Very well. I'm here to ask you to leave Title 13 of the United States Code alone."

He sighed. "Tell me something I don't know."

"I doubt I'll be able to, Peter. But maybe I can give you a different perspective on it."

"A different perspective? On my Census bill?"

Isabel opened up her briefcase and removed one of her handhelds. "I have here the text of your bill, and the argument that you've given in favor of it."

"Mrrph."

Isabel turned the handheld on and read to herself briefly. "According to this, your bill would push the date of release of the individual Census forms from seventy-two to seventy-five years."

"It makes sense, Isabel."

"It does?"

He pointed to her handheld. "You say you have my argument in there."

"I do. And I find it specious."

"Oh, really?"

She nodded. "You're very clever, the way you're hiding this change as a way to save money for both the federal government and the taxpayers."

"Well, it does save money. With more time to process the individual Census reports, the less we'll have to pay overall. And who cares if we delay the release of the individual questionnaires from 2030? It's not like there are a ton of people dying to see them."

"But there are. I represent a coalition of historians--"

"That wasn't a joke?"

"No, it's not a joke."

"Look, historians have always waited seventy-two years for the individual questionnaires to be released. And they have the statistical data; hell, they've had it since the Census was taken. This is such a minor thing; I have no idea why you're so upset about it."

"Then let me tell you. Suppose you do push the release date to seventy-five years. And the world doesn't come to an end."

"So?"

"So a precedent is set. A few years later, someone else suggests that we push it to eighty years, then ninety, then one hundred. Before you know it, Census data is kept confidential in perpetuity and history is lost. And all because you managed to push the date of release to seventy-five years."

Peter stared at her for a moment, then let loose with a raucous guffaw. "History is lost? You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not. It's like the great copyright battles of the early twenty-first century. When all the corporations fought for copyright extensions so they could hold onto the rights to their characters so that no one else could ever use them."

"So Time-Warner-Marvel-Disney still owns Mickey Mouse, Superman, and Spider-Man. So what?"

"So our cultural heritage is taken away from the public and reserved for the corporations. Now it's our historical identity that you're threatening to rob with your new bill."

"Isabel, it's not just the money."

"Right. It's also the longevity factor."

Peter looked surprised, but nodded. "People live longer today. Our founding fathers lived in a world in which the average lifespan was barely forty years. They couldn't fathom a world in which people routinely lived to be three times that age. But here we are today, and there are millions of people alive right now who filled out that Census back in 2030. Releasing the information too soon would be a violation of their privacy. History must be subservient to the living."

She shook her head slowly. "You don't really believe that, Peter. I know you too well. Perhaps you think that history ought to be subservient to you, but not to the rest of us."

"So what if I do? The argument still holds."

She sighed. "Peter, you're forcing my hand. And I really don't think you want to do that."

He leaned back in his chair and gave Isabel a small smile. "Oh, why not? Amuse me. What else have you got?"

Isabel took a deep breath and considered her words carefully before she spoke. "Very well. Peter, according to your birth certificate, you've just turned 68 years old this month. And the significance of your age is not lost on me. You're in the 2030 census. It's not others you're trying to protect; it's yourself."

#

Time seemed to stand still for Isabel. She had not wanted to bring up her trump card, but here it was. And Peter sat there, quiet and unmoving, his face unreadable.

Isabel counted off thirty seconds in her head before she found the courage to break the silence. "Peter?"

"*Senator*," he replied.

She nodded. "Senator Fitzgerald. Will you agree to drop the bill? Or should I--"

Peter cut her off. "No. Go on. I want to hear what you have to say."

"Okay. Let me start from basics, then. If Title 13 stays the same, the 2030 census data will be released in 2102. But if your law gets passed, it doesn't get released until 2105."

"So?"

"You're planning to run for president in 2104, aren't you?"

He glared at her. "The media's speculations --"

"Screw the media, Senator. I'm not about to head out your office door and go blogging on the Holosites. For the moment, this is just you and me in your office. So are you running for president in 2104?"

"I'm running for re-election *now*, Isabel. In case you had forgotten, my current term as senator expires this year. And the voters of Massachusetts either support the idea of pushing the Census release ahead by three years, or they don't care. And given the demographics of the rest of the country--"

"I know the demographics of the country. Over forty percent of the population is over sixty-five. If you bother to present the longevity argument to them, they may very well support the bill. But think for a moment. I'm not the only one who's going to be able to make this connection. It's obvious that if Title 13 is changed, your personal first Census record will stay hidden until after the election of 2104.

"So what's in the census of 2030 that *you* want to hide?"

Peter sighed. "I always said you were smarter than I was, Isabel. Why didn't you go into politics?"

"I preferred teaching history at Harvard."

"Yes, you did. Well, I didn't tell you my secret when we were married; what makes you think I'll tell you now?"

"Because I wanted to give you the chance to do so before I told it to you."

For the first time that she could recall, Isabel saw fear on Peter's face. He tried to cover it up with a sneer, but Isabel could see right through him.

"Oh, really?" he asked. "You think you know what I'm hiding?"

"Yes. I did some digging of my own." She reached into her briefcase and pulled out another handheld.

"The United States went through a bizarre period at the turn of the millennium. We were polarized between the liberal states and the conservative states, kind of like we are today. Even the war on terror couldn't unite the country for more than a brief period of time. And our state, Massachusetts, has always been among the most radical. Lexington and Concord. The only state not to vote for Nixon. Same sex marriage from 2004 to 2044. Polygamy approved under the second Mormon governor."

She paused. "And, thanks to MIT and Harvard, legal human cloning for a very brief window in the 2020s."

Peter coughed. "That has nothing to do with me."

"Not according to your birth certificate, no. But birth certificates never revealed that information. The Census, on the other hand, added a question in April of 2030, because of the legality of cloning."

Isabel studied Peter's face; the fear was gone.

"Isabel--" he began.

"There's no record of your mother, Peter."

"She died in childbirth."

"That's what you always told me before. But that's not what I found." She paused. "You're a clone of your father, Peter. Or rather, of one of them. And I have proof."

Peter remained quiet, so Isabel pressed on. "Before 2004, your biological father would have been what was euphemistically referred to as a confirmed bachelor. But according to records in Brookline Town Hall, your father was married to another man when you were born. Of course, in this day and age no one may care about that, especially since your fathers divorced shortly after you were born.

"But they will care about the fact that you're a clone."

Peter bit his lip. "I'm just as much a human being as anyone else."

"Of course you are, Peter. I don't deny it. But there are people out there who will claim that you're not, that you lack a soul, or that you're a demon. Insufferable bigots, all of them. But unfortunately for you, there's still a stigma."

"Are you going to reveal this?"

"Only if you make me. The way I see it, Peter, if you pull back from your position on Title 13, you have a chance that no one will find out your secret. After all, there's a lot of Census data to go through. On the other hand, since you've been so vocal about pushing the release date to seventy-five years, your opponents might very well do some extensive digging before the election. But that's a chance you've got to take. Because if you don't back off, I'm releasing what I know to the press. And your secret will definitely be out."

He wrung his hands. "It was never about protecting history with you at all, Isabel. You just wanted to ruin me."

"Partly," she admitted. "I hated the way politics tore us apart. But I'd rather not ruin you if I don't have to. There is another way."

"What?"

"Be bold, for once in your life."

"What are you talking about?"

Isabel smiled. "Throughout our history, great men and women have stepped forward to stop discrimination. Rosa Parks. Martin Luther King. Margaret Marshall." She paused. "You can be one of them. Fight the good fight. Let the world know that you're a clone before the Census data is released in 2102."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I'm not sure I have the strength for that kind of fight anymore."

"Then you shouldn't be in the Senate anymore, should you?" She paused. "You fought like this once before. You can do it again. Hell, don't wait until the presidential election of 2104. Announce it now, during your '98 re-election campaign."

"I'll lose my seat."

"So what? You'll gain a place in history, a far more important place than if you became president. I know you've always been obsessed with history, Peter. That's why I married you. Return the favor to history."

Peter sighed and pushed back away from his desk. He stood up, walked around Isabel, and stopped at his office window. He stood there quietly for a moment, then turned to face Isabel again. She could see a weary look in his eyes.

"Well?" she asked.

"I don't know if I can handle it," he said.

"I'm sure you can."

He closed the distance between them and took her hand, surprising her. "Perhaps I could," he said. "But only on one condition."

"You're naming conditions?"

"Yes." He paused. "Stay with me."

"I'm sorry?"

"I never should have let you go."

"Is this blackmail?"

He sighed again. "No, no it's not. I'll do what you ask, whether or not you join me again. But you were always the stronger of the two of us. And this burden...it would be better shared."

She looked into his eyes, and for the first time in years, saw in his soul the man she remembered. Gently, she squeezed his hand, and felt him squeeze hers back.

"It would be," she said.

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