

**DEAD POLITICIAN
SOCIETY**

A CLARE VENGEL UNDERCOVER NOVEL



**ROBIN
SPANO**

EGW PRESS

TUESDAY / SEPTEMBER 7

ONE

CLARE

Clare Vengel tossed a leg over her Triumph and kicked it into gear. The sun was shining, the mayor was dead, and Cloutier wanted to meet with her. As she sped along Dundas Street, weaving a bit too quickly through traffic, visions of her first undercover assignment played in her head.

At Dundas and Dupont, she found the agreed-upon donut shop. Sergeant Cloutier was already seated with two enormous coffees.

“So.” Clare flashed her brightest smile. “Who am I?”

She slid into the cushioned booth, and set her helmet on the seat beside her.

Cloutier opened a bag and pulled out a dutchie. “I’m not pleased to be using you.”

“Okay.” That was fair. She was as green as they came. Clare determined to please him with results.

“We need someone who looks young. We also need someone with field experience. Apparently in this enlightened age it’s the packaging that counts.”

Clare sipped her coffee. What was she supposed to say?

Cloutier nodded to some sugar packets in the center of the

table. “You’re not gonna use those?”

Clare wrinkled her nose. “No, thanks.”

Cloutier took one and added it to his own coffee.

“You’re going back to school.” He slid a plain white envelope across the table. “You’re a third year political science student.”

“Political science?” Clare opened the envelope and discreetly observed a student card, driver’s license, and other documents that identified her as Clare Simpson. “Is that more like politics or science?”

Cloutier shook his head irritably. “Politics.”

“Oh.” Clare would have preferred science.

“You think you can get up to speed fast enough?”

“Of course.” She’d stay awake all night if she had to. “Is there a reason I’m only half undercover?”

“You’re keeping your first name to make things easier on you.”

“Thanks.” Clare wasn’t sure whether to feel protected or insulted.

“This isn’t a permanent transfer.” Cloutier broke a piece from his donut. “Screw this case up, and it’s back to the beat for a very long time.”

“Okay.” Again, fair. Most cops had to put in years in uniform before they’d be given an undercover assignment. She’d been on the force for three months. “How did the mayor die?”

“Do you live on this planet?”

Clare eyed Cloutier’s dutchie. She wished she had one of her own. Or something greasy, like bacon or sausage, to soak up her mild hangover.

“Hayden Pritchard died at last night’s Working Child Benefit. He collapsed in his own vomit. It was all over the news.”

“Oh.” Clare was supposed to feel ignorant because she didn’t spend her evenings glued to the local fucking news? Fine, maybe she felt a little bit ignorant, but she wasn’t going to show it.

“Just read this.” Cloutier passed a printed email across the stained Formica table.

Hayden Pritchard — July 27, 1954–September 6, 2010

We hereby launch our campaign to create a political utopia for the real world. Hayden Pritchard made a dramatic exit from life last night, facilitated by the poison we slipped him.

Pritchard became mayor thirteen years ago, at which point he began to skillfully destroy the city's economy. He spent piles of money to cultivate all kinds of fringe votes, and when he went over budget, he simply raised taxes to compensate. Small business owners closed up shop or moved to the suburbs in response to punishing tax hikes, and Toronto was ranked the worst place in the western world to do business. We might have been fine with this if that money had been used to save some wildlife or give scholarships to inner-city kids, but as far as we can tell, society's problems have remained intact. Pritchard and his staffers are okay with all this; they've received a fifty percent pay raise.

With another election three long years away, we have decided to free taxpayers from Pritchard's socialist nightmare.

You're welcome.

This has been a message from the Society for Political Utopia.

Clare wasn't sure why her fingers trembled as she handed the page back to Cloutier.

"This email was sent to Annabel Davis, the assistant obituary editor at the *Star*."

"Obituaries?" Clare rolled her eyes upward, and saw that the drop ceiling was badly in need of repair. "I guess there isn't a homicidal rants editor. Is the newspaper printing it?"

“Not for now.”

“Do we know who sent the email?”

“Yeah. That’s why we need the investigation.”

Clare wanted to groan, but reminded herself to stay positive.

“The source computer was wireless.” Cloutier took one of the unused creamers and added it to his coffee, not bothering to stir it in. “A laptop, or one of those fancy Internet phones. The address was nicknamed ‘Utopia Girl.’”

“I presume we know that the mayor actually died from poison.”

“You don’t need to do any presuming. We have detectives for that. But yes: the medical examiner found massive organ damage consistent with some common poisons. Pritchard’s genitals and urinary organs were congested with blood.”

“You mean his cock was hard,” Clare said, then immediately felt morbid.

Cloutier looked Clare in the eye. “Pritchard’s death was painful and miserable.”

Of course it was—her comment had been callous and horrible. She tried another tack. “Had he recently started a new medication? Viagra maybe? If he was already on some other drug, for his heart or something, the two could have interacted badly.”

“Thanks for your medical opinion.”

Clare tried to take a sip of coffee, but ended up dribbling most of it down her chin and onto her favorite T-shirt.

“Your job is basic, Vengel: go in as a student, keep your eyes and ears open, and get in touch when you find something that might help us.”

“Okay.” Clare stroked her helmet, which sat beside her on the plastic bench. “How about an obvious question: Why do we think this ‘Utopia Girl’ is the killer? Doesn’t every nutcase and his brother pop out of the woodwork when a famous person dies?”

“The inspector obviously thinks there’s something to it.”

Clare leaned forward. “Which inspector?”

“Detective Inspector Morton hand-picked you for this assignment.”

“Cool.” Clare liked Morton—and apparently he thought she was worth a chance. He had hardly been exuberant when she’d met him, but he at least hadn’t laughed her out of his office when she’d approached him about undercover work. “And — last question, I swear — what’s the connection to the university? Is that where the email was sent from?”

“Looks that way.” Cloutier ate the last of his donut and stuffed his crumpled napkin into the bag. “Your first class is at eleven a.m. if you can make it, but the course that most interests us is your two o’clock. It meets twice a week. Tuesday afternoons and Thursday mornings. It’s called Political Utopia for the Real World.”

Clare’s eyes scanned the obituary upside down. “Is it a large class?”

“Twenty students, plus you. Now go. You have pencils and notebooks to buy.”

“Can I invoice the station for them?”

“Of course. Just don’t buy anything fancy.”

“Do I look like I’d want something fancy?” Clare picked up her helmet.

“No, you don’t.” Cloutier smirked. “Have a good day at school.”

Clare rode off into the morning.

TWO

MATTHEW

Matthew leapt aside to avoid the tattooed adolescent riding full speed down the footpath. He protectively balanced his full, steaming coffee, and allowed himself a cautious sip once the kamikaze student was three buildings away.

On another day, Matthew might have snarled at the kid, or thrown him a sarcastic comment about being more considerate. But today was his favorite of the year: the first day of school. Students rushed around campus, energizing it with their flurry of self-centered activity. The Gothic buildings were regal in the late summer's light. Matthew himself felt natty and hip in designer blue jeans and his retro tweed jacket. It would take more than a socialist on a bicycle to knock him off his perfect cloud.

Since he'd been a child in Scarborough, he'd always loved the first day of school. The first day held the promise that the coming year would be the great one. He could be voted school president by an overwhelming majority, or win an academic award that had Oxford knocking on his door, or Mariana Livingstone might finally recognize his *je ne sais quoi* and fuck his brains out behind the football field.

Now, Matthew felt like his great year had come, at last and to stay. He arrived at his office building, the concrete and glass block that was home to several other departments in addition to Political Science. He climbed the wide stone staircase, and smiled at a group of teenaged girls who had the doe-eyed look of first-year students. They made up for all the Marianas who never had given him the time of day, behind the bleachers or anywhere else.

“Dr. Easton!” An eager voice accompanied light footsteps running up the staircase behind him.

Matthew turned to see a student from a previous year’s introductory course. She was a stunning girl — tall, fair-complexioned, and full of original ideas. “Jessica. How was your summer?”

“Terrible.” The girl scowled. “I spent it looking after my sick grandmother in her gloomy old mansion.”

“How altruistic.”

“How depressing.” Jessica shifted the faded leather bag on her shoulder. “I was supposed to go tree-planting out west, which I was totally stoked about. Anyway, her health conveniently cleared up right at the end of the summer.”

“Well that’s . . . good news?”

“It is.” Jessica sighed. “And I’m thrilled to be taking Poli Real World this year. It’s great to have one course where we’re actually encouraged to have strong opinions.”

“I’m delighted to hear it.” Matthew reached for the door handle. “I look forward to your contributions in class.”

“I’m just so angry sometimes with the whole system. It boils my blood that there are no checks and balances to keep the politicians accountable.”

“Frustration keeps the course going,” Matthew said. “And it’s useful. Last year when we submitted our course conclusions to our local representative, he brought two of our ideas to the table in Parliament.”

“Yeah?” Jessica seemed rooted to the steps. “Did it change any policy?”

“Not this time. But we’ll get there. Was there anything else?”

“Um, no, I don’t think so.” Jessica chewed on her lip. “I’ll see you around?”

“Brilliant.”

Matthew slipped inside the building, opted for climbing two flights of stairs instead of making conversation with his colleagues in the elevator, and let himself into his office for the first time in four months.

The room was ugly and institutional. The cheap metal bookshelf held political texts spanning the twenty years from his high school days until now. All that was missing was a book with Matthew’s name on the cover. Although of course he would have preferred sturdy wooden shelves in a musty room in an ivy-covered hall, having his own private corner of this large, prestigious university made him feel like he’d arrived.

He dusted off his swivel chair and a portion of his desk, and pulled a pile of paperwork from his briefcase. He enjoyed one short sip of coffee before a knock at the door interrupted him.

“Come in, Shirley!”

“Is my knock so distinctive?” Dr. Rosenblum poked her head into Matthew’s office, and followed with her compact body. “How was your summer?”

“Productive,” Matthew said. “I’ve finished the first draft of my book, and my editor finally seems to understand my vision.”

“You relented on the editorial bias, then.” Shirley lifted an eyebrow. “Good for you. Have you also considered changing your public outlook on Hayden Pritchard?”

“Public? I don’t think Pritchard is anywhere in my book.”

“I meant for your students. I know you’ve circulated at least two summer reading articles bashing Pritchard and his policy.”

“I’m flattered that you take such an interest in my courses.”

“Oh, stop your preening. I’m serious. I don’t want you maligning a man whose corpse isn’t even cold.”

“What do you take me for? Some kind of lunatic zealot?”

Shirley patted her already immaculate gray curls into place. “It’s not the worst description.”

“Well you have my word of honor.” Matthew took a long sip of coffee before continuing. “I won’t bring champagne to class, and I won’t expose my real opinion, which is that I think Pritchard self-destructed naturally when his crummy karma came knocking.”

“Funny. By the way, you have a new transfer student. Clare Simpson. I know you like to handpick the class list, but I took the liberty of adding Clare to Poli Real World.”

“You what?”

“I’m sorry. But the Registrar asked as a special favor. I got the impression that Clare’s parents are friends with someone important in administration.”

“You just got that impression, did you?”

“It was implied that the Chancellor would appreciate the concession.”

Matthew shook his head. “This is exactly what’s wrong with the system. Don’t you see? Privilege breeds privilege.”

“I thought it was socialists you hated.”

“I hate socialists when they’re hypocrites.” Matthew couldn’t get the coffee into his system fast enough. “Like Hayden Pritchard. May he rot in peace. But a million times worse is some entitled little bitch who gets to bypass all the hurdles that make an accomplishment worth anything. How am I supposed to congratulate my twenty other students on being selected for the course when Clare fucking Simpson comes breezing in with daddy’s gold card?”

“I agree that the world shouldn’t work this way,” Shirley said. “But it does, and there it is. More power to you and your students when you finally succeed in changing it.”

“Fine,” Matthew said. “I’m not going to fight you. But no special grades. Clare either holds her own like the rest of the students, or I won’t hesitate to fail her.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

“Shall I cc you in the email when I send the class their revised reading list?” Matthew felt this was a strong enough dismissal,

except that when he turned back to his work, his elbow caught his nearly full coffee and launched it into its death spin. He scrambled to save the papers on his desk, which thankfully were minimal after a summer away from the office. He faced Shirley, and noticed the misshapen ceramic mug in her hand, “World’s Coolest Grandma” painted inexpertly onto the side.

“Oh, not your look.” Shirley grimaced, but her eyes were smiling. “It isn’t your gourmet dark roast, and I can’t offer you any fancy soy milk, but yes, I have a pot of coffee on in my office.”

THREE

LAURA

Laura Pritchard was washing up from breakfast when Penny Craig called from the *Star*. It was a shame, Laura thought, that Hayden wasn't alive to appreciate the drama. He wouldn't care that he was dead — even as a young man, he'd never seemed particularly involved in his own life. But all this press and intrigue? He would have been in Hayden Heaven. Laura closed the dishwasher and gazed out upon her backyard garden.

"Thanks for calling," she told Penny. "I promise, not a word until the story comes out."

"I appreciate it," Penny said. "The police have asked us to hold publication indefinitely."

"Can they make you do that?" Laura pulled a stool out from the marble counter, and sat down.

"They can ask. It helps that the inspector in charge has promised the *Star* an exclusive interview once they've finished their investigation. If that letter isn't a hoax, this is the story of a lifetime."

"I imagine it must be."

“My god. I’m so insensitive. Are you going to be all right? I’m tied up all morning, but I can make time for lunch if you want to chat.”

“Thanks, but my head’s going to be all over the place.” When had she ever met Penny to chat? “Does anyone else know about the email?”

“Only Annabel Davis. The poor woman has been made to fear for her job if the smallest word slips through her lips.”

“I can imagine.” Laura had witnessed Penny’s wrath in high school, thankfully never directed her way. “So why are you telling me?”

“God, Laura, I’m not a piranha. Sure, I want my exclusive, but friends come first. Besides, I trust your discretion.”

Friends?

Susannah stomped muddily through the kitchen door, causing Laura to shake her head with mock horror.

“These tomatoes are coming up nicer every year.” Susannah plonked three juicy-looking samples onto the counter Laura had just finished scrubbing.

“Listen, Penny. I appreciate the call. Susie’s come inside, and it’s her first day back at school, so I’d like to see her off.”

“How cute. Have you packed her a lunch?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s thirty-five. She’s been getting her own lunch for a year now.”

Penny laughed. “You won’t say anything about the email, though, right? Not even to Susannah.”

“I’ve promised I won’t.” Laura turned off the telephone handset.

Susannah helped herself to a mug of the coffee Laura had brewed. Masses of dark curls seemed to fly in all directions. Laura touched a strand of her own carefully blow-dried hair, and wished she could be so unconcerned with her appearance.

She smiled at Susannah. “I swear, you must lie down and make dirt angels when you’re back there. I’ve never seen a filthier gardener.”

“I like to feel the earth between my fingers.” Susannah pulled up a stool of her own.

“Don’t you have class this morning?”

“I’m taking off in a few minutes. The course I’m stoked about isn’t ’til this afternoon. Poli Real World. Hey, you think you could get me an interview with your ex-husband on how *not* to create a utopian political climate?” Susannah clapped a hand to her mouth. “God, Laura. I’m sorry. I talk without thinking. I forgot for a second that he . . . you know . . . died.”

Laura leaned into the counter, and rested her chin in her hands. “I just got some strange news about Hayden.”

“And you were talking to me about dirt angels?”

“The *Star* received an email this morning taking credit for his death.”

“The newspaper? Are they taking it seriously?”

“The police are. They don’t normally.” Laura felt her voice shaking. “Last week, Penny said, they had three separate people claiming to know the whereabouts of Jimmy Hoffa’s body.”

“Are you all right?” Susannah pushed the fruit bowl aside to reach across the counter for Laura’s hand. She held it firmly. “I’ll skip my morning class.”

Laura squeezed back. “Go to school. I’ll be fine.”

“Really,” Susannah said. “I can miss the opening lecture from Dr. Robertson. That man defined the word pompous then expanded the definition to fit himself in.”

They sat for several moments before the doorbell broke the silence.

Susannah got up. “I’ll grab it.”

The ground floor was an open concept, and Laura watched Susannah hop the half-flight of stairs down to the living room, then open the door for two men. They weren’t wearing uniforms, but they introduced themselves loudly as Detective Inspector David Morton and Detective Sergeant Raj Kumar.

Laura stood up from her stool, and Susannah led the detectives up to the kitchen at the back of the house.

“Laura Pritchard? We need to ask you some questions.” Morton was slight and anxious-looking. Probably around Laura’s age, she thought; maybe a few years younger.

“Am I a suspect?” Laura surprised herself by blurting out the question. “Sorry. What I mean is would you like some coffee? Please sit down.”

Kumar pulled a chair from the round kitchen table and made himself comfortable. He was good-looking, somewhere in his thirties, and his warm brown eyes moved constantly. Laura had the sensation that he was memorizing her kitchen, but she didn’t find it unsettling.

“No coffee, thank you.” Inspector Morton continued to stand. “Pritchard is the right name?”

“It’s fine,” Laura said. “I’ve been using my maiden name, Sutton, since Hayden and I separated. But technically, yes, I’m still Pritchard. Would you like anything at all? A glass of water?”

Kumar seemed about to accept, but Morton’s reply preempted him. “No, thank you, ma’am. You initiated the separation, is that correct?”

Ma’am. When had fifty become over-the-hill? Laura felt like her life was just beginning — apparently the outside world would disagree. She sat down opposite Kumar, who silently made notes.

“Yes,” Laura said. “I left Hayden.”

“And yet you never agreed to sign the papers for a divorce?”

“What is this?” Susannah was perched on a stool at the counter. “Your perverted version of a bedside manner? Laura has lost someone who meant a lot to her.”

“Your name, please?” Morton asked.

“Susannah Steinberg. But you haven’t answered my question. What gives you the right to come in here, all highbrow and —”

“Do you live here, Ms. Steinberg? Are you a friend, or a roommate, of Mrs. Pritchard’s?”

“Girlfriend,” Susannah said. “As in, I like to see her naked. And caress her. And run my tongue along her inner thigh until I come to — well, you get the point. And yes, I live here too.”

Morton smiled thinly. “How long have you been together?”

“Three and a half years.” Susannah poured herself a mug of coffee. “Plus I was after her for a year before that.”

“How did you meet?”

“At a homelessness rally, originally.” Laura tried to move the tone back to friendly. “Then we worked together on a literacy campaign in Regent Park.”

“Then Laura moved here — as in, away from her husband — and I haunted her local pub.” Susannah seemed to delight in the detectives’ discomfort. “I bought her a glass of fucking expensive Cabernet Sauvignon every Friday for about six months before she agreed to dinner.”

“Please. You bought me house wine.”

“Not at first.”

Kumar coughed into his hand.

Morton glanced at him, then turned back to Laura. “When did you and your late husband separate?”

“Four years ago.”

“Susannah was ‘after you’ while you were married?” Kumar looked up from his notepad.

“Only briefly,” Susannah said. “But she didn’t know I was flirting until later.”

“Now Mrs. Pritchard — Ms. Sutton — I’ll need you to account for your whereabouts yesterday. From the morning, please.”

Laura ran through a brief account of her more or less typical day.

“You both attended last night’s Working Child benefit?” Morton’s thin eyebrows lifted.

“The Brighter Day hosted the event. We were volunteering.”

“In what capacity?”

“Supervisory, mainly,” Laura said. “We’d both been on the planning committee from the get-go. Susannah was in the kitchen, running damage control and making sure the food came out in good time. I was out front, greeting guests, assisting with

last minute seating changes, that kind of thing.”

“Why did you choose those roles?” Morton asked. “Or were they selected for you?”

“A bit of each, I suppose.” Laura stroked the handle of her coffee mug, a Mother’s Day gift from when her daughter had been ten that had somehow survived the years and the move. “Susie has catering experience, and I’ve entertained a good chunk of the guest list in my home at one point or another.”

“In this home?” Morton glanced around the split-level, cottage-style house. The furniture was expensive, and the colors were vibrant and warm, but Laura knew the overall effect hardly suggested impressive guest lists.

“In the home I shared with Hayden.”

“When did your husband buy his ticket for the fundraiser?”

“Oh, Hayden didn’t buy his own ticket. The political parties always take a table or two at events like this.”

“All right. At what point was it known that Mayor Pritchard would be attending the benefit?”

“I don’t know.” Laura wrinkled her brow. “A few weeks ahead of time, I suppose.”

“Who would have had access to the guest list?”

“Well, the Brighter Day, of course. Maybe Elly’s Epicure, the caterer, although I doubt that. Susie, do you still have their card?”

Susannah shrugged.

“Did your husband have a will?”

“Estranged husband,” Susannah said. “Isn’t there such thing as a common law divorce?”

“No,” Morton said. “Mrs. Pritchard, do you know if your late husband had a will?”

“We had wills when we were together. I’ve since changed mine. I assume he has, too.”

“Do you know the approximate value of his investments and real estate holdings?”

“Can you leave us alone now?” Susannah said. “I’m sure violent suspicious death is all in a day’s work for the pair of you, but

Laura has received an enormous shock. This is information you could get from Hayden's lawyer or accountant or bloody mistress."

Morton eyed Susannah for several moments before speaking. "Have you finished talking?"

Susannah rolled her eyes. "Laura, you want me to stay? I'm thinking I'll take off to class if that's okay with you."

"Where's your class?" Kumar asked, pen poised.

"It's at the school of None of Your Fucking Business," Susannah said. "And after that, I'll be joining friends at the You Can Fuck Yourself Café. Stop in if you're not busy."

FOUR

CLARE

“Is someone alive in there, Simpson?”

It took a second for her name to catch, and when it did, Clare was taken back to high school, caught daydreaming by a teacher who had failed to keep her attention.

“Pardon me?” Clare batted her eyelashes, which solicited stifled giggles from the students.

“Oh God. Not a comedienne.” Dr. Easton grabbed at his hair and pulled it. “We were talking about the questionnaires you’ve been filling out. Or did you want more time to complete yours in light of having just returned to Earth?”

Dr. Easton was younger than Clare would have imagined, not the stodgy old professor type at all. He had a mildly pompous accent, like he thought he was British. And there was that stupid tweed jacket that hung on the back of his chair. But he was cute, in a prep school prefect kind of way.

“I finished the survey,” Clare said. “I only zoned out for the last couple of minutes.”

“Delightful. Now if everyone’s ready, I’d like you to pass the completed *questionnaire* to the person on your left.”

The classroom was arranged in a two-tiered rectangle, with eight students in the front row and thirteen in the back. Clare guessed that the layout was designed to mimic Parliament.

When she had finished decoding her right-hand neighbor's questionnaire, Clare got her own results back from Jessica, the blond on her left.

"B, huh?" Clare said. "I wonder if this secretly predetermines our grade for the course."

"Don't feel too bad." Jessica smirked. "I got a C."

"Who's feeling bad? I'm thrilled with a B."

"Does everyone have their results?" Dr. Easton waited while papers were shuffled and general nods of assent came from the room. "How many As?"

Five hands went up.

"You guys are the Rednecks. How many Bs?"

Ten hands, including Clare's.

"It always starts out this way." Dr. Easton seemed personally offended by the results. "We'll take the same questionnaire at the end of the year and half of you will have converted to something more sensible. You Bs are the Commies.

"The rest of you — that should be six, since we have twenty-one this year —" Dr. Easton paused to glare pointedly at Clare. "— are the Tree-Huggers."

Clare felt like she'd landed on an island where the natives all spoke Zulu. She gathered that the party names were sarcastic, but she didn't get the jokes. Her only hope for survival was to smile through that day, then scour the Internet for political wisdom when she got home.

"The Commies are going to form a minority government. Now it's time to get into groups and choose a leader for each party."

Clare said goodbye to Jessica and joined her group. A woman took charge straightaway. She had messy dark hair and seemed older than most of the class, maybe somewhere in her thirties. "All right. Who wants to run this party?"

“I’ll run.” A sandy-haired guy in khakis and a dress shirt puffed out his chest. “I’m Brian Haas. I’m a card-carrying Communist in real life, so clearly Dr. Easton’s questionnaire is effective. I have several bills already drafted, but the one I’d like to start with deals with safe, affordable, and integrated public housing. My father used to be president of the federal Communists, and I’d love to follow in his footsteps to lead this party to greatness.” He spoke for a minute or so, carefully, as if he’d scripted his speech in front of the mirror before coming to school that morning. He reminded Clare of a very serious child all dressed up to attend an adult party. She wasn’t sure why it made her sad.

“Anyone else?” The older woman spoke up again. When Clare and the others shook their heads, she said, “Fine. I’ll put myself up. I’m Susannah Steinberg. Damn right I’m a Commie, as insulting as Dr. Easton may think the term is. The biggest challenge we have — in Canada, sure, but I’m thinking globally, too — is equalizing people’s opportunities. Why should a kid in Africa have to die of malaria instead of living into his twenties and being here in this classroom with us? Also, I don’t think anyone should ever vote party line over their own principles; in my government, all votes will be free votes. I can’t stand hypocrisy. I say let’s get real and change the world.”

The ten group members put their votes onto paper. Susannah won, and named Brian her deputy. Brian’s chest deflated, but he congratulated Susannah and kept his smile bright.

Dr. Easton called the class back to order. “Can I have the party leaders come up to the stage?”

Three students arranged themselves on the raised platform by the chalkboard.

“Next we’ll hear a short speech from our leaders. The Commies have the most representatives, so Susannah, that makes you World Leader. Go ahead.”

Susannah wiped her palms on her jeans and nodded at her classmates. “My government will be dedicated to social causes, redistributing wealth, and creating a world that works. I’m not

looking to dominate by numbers; instead, I'd like to incorporate good ideas from across the spectrum. All votes will be free votes. Let's make this country fabulous."

"Sounds benevolent," Matthew said. "How many of you think she would be taking such a generous stance if she had a majority?"

The class tittered, and Clare felt left in the dark.

Next up was Diane Mateo, the leader of the Rednecks. She wore black dress pants and a red polyester top. A large, sparkly cross hung from her neck, and her dark brown hair was pulled back into a bun. "Great theory, Susannah, but show me a minority government that gets anything done. For me, fiscal responsibility is the first premise of responsible governing. And that includes an accountable government. In the private sector, every employee, even a CEO, has to justify their wages or they lose their job. For too long, in government, we haven't made our politicians earn their keep. I plan to seek an alliance with the Tree-Huggers in order to give this 'world' the leadership it deserves. Without a balanced budget, it doesn't matter how wonderful the Commies' ideas are — we won't have the money to make them happen."

"Thanks, Diane. Let's hear from the Tree-Huggers."

Jessica stood up. "The environment is the most neglected and essential issue facing us today. Our party will focus on maintaining and restoring wildlife habitats, reducing carbon and other emissions — duh — and promoting weekly wilderness visits as part of every child's education — gotta get the love for the Earth flowing forward, right?"

"Then there's the economy — the other parties have only made a mess of it. Our fiscal policy will be conservative — yes, arts funding will suffer. If you like the opera, either pay to go see it or donate to keep it alive. And yes, social welfare will be revised: instead of giving homeless people shelters they don't want, we'll give birds the sanctuaries they do want.

"Our mandate is conservation — or to use the hot word of today, 'sustainability.' We want the earth and the economy to thrive in tandem."

“Thanks, leaders. You can sit with your parties again.” Dr. Easton smoothed back his short, sandy hair. “I’ll be your Speaker of the House, with the odd lecture thrown in for good measure.

“You’ve all taken language courses that were conducted entirely in French or Spanish. This course will be run almost entirely as a mock parliament. The focus should be global — I want ideas that make the world a better place, not just the microcosm where we live. The culmination of the course is twofold: by the end of the year, you will each hand in an independent package describing your personal utopia. Also, the class will, through debate and voting, determine its collective utopia. No one can cross the floor to join another party, but alliances and coalitions are fair game.”

Clare hoped this was all written down somewhere in a class summary, because she was already lost.

“Your assignment for Thursday is to bring one bill to be tabled and voted upon. There is no taboo topic — gay porn, child marriage, it’s open season as long as there’s no hate — but I insist upon two things: you have to want the bill passed, and you must believe that it could realistically be implemented.”

Jonathan, from the Tree-Huggers, spoke up: “What about legalizing marijuana? Is that in the too unrealistic category?”

“No, that’s a good one,” Dr. Easton said. “By unrealistic, I mean I’m not interested in debating the merits of having flying cars available for public use.

“Anyway, it’s five past four. It was great to meet you all. Now go away.”