



**BRIAN MARTIN**

# **FRANCINE'S QUEST**

**LEARNING FROM THE ACADEMY AND THE STREET**



# **Francine's quest**

Francine is a nurse, but her passion is helping activists be more effective. She decides to find out what activists can learn from academic work — maybe nothing! How better to do this than by recruiting some of her activist friends to join the project? Francine and her co-investigators explore how to obtain and understand scholarly articles and what it means to think theoretically, and get some insight into what it's like to be an academic. While making some progress in their quest, each one is inspired in a personal way.

This is a fictional story for activists and potential activists so they can better understand what's going on in the academic world and figure out what, if anything, they might be able to learn from it.

**Francine's quest**  
**Learning from**  
**the academy and the street**

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# 1

## Dining on ignorance

“Ah, here it is, the Maki Magic.” Betty was walking along the street, looking for the Japanese restaurant. It was hardly magical, she thought: down-market, a bit faded, but still nicely maintained. She was welcomed by a deferential waiter who led her to a small separate room, just large enough for the small group she expected to be joining for dinner. It had a low table, with a sunken cavity below for the diners’ feet. Betty had already placed her shoes at the nearby stand. Around were reproductions of what looked to Betty like typical Japanese artworks.

At the table was a young man who looked like he had tried to spruce up but hadn’t gotten all the way there. He scrambled up with a broad grin to say hello. “I’m Roberto. Great to meet you.” Roberto was handsome, slim, athletic and tall in his bare feet, much taller than Betty. He looked no older than 20 but may have been in his mid-20s. Betty noted his casual dress and his tousled hair, and the absence of visible rings or tattoos.

“Good to meet you — Roberto. You live near here?” Before he could answer, Betty changed tack. “Actually, first can I ask, how do you know Francine?”

Francine was the reason she was here. Francine seemed to know everyone in the neighbourhood, indeed everyone in the town and, somewhat mysteriously, she had invited Betty to this dinner. Francine said she’d invited four



besides herself, and she didn't think Betty would know any of the others.

Francine was in her 40s, a small, solidly built, passionate woman who supported all sorts of causes, including climate campaigning, workers' rights, animal rights, you name it. Betty sometimes thought Francine was a professional activist, but actually she was a nurse who seemed to spend every spare minute in meetings or protests, or writing letters to politicians or the media. Francine dressed differently depending on the occasion, being attentive to what would most help the cause, whichever cause it was at the time. To Betty, Francine sometimes seemed almost manipulative in her efforts. No, that was unfair. She was completely sincere and just doing what she could to be effective.

Betty knew Francine from a campaign years ago, a campaign to stop a development in the town that would have destroyed a treasured old post office building. Betty had joined the group spearheading the campaign. Francine came along and was brilliant in helping them succeed. They had been in touch ever since.

So it was natural to ask Roberto, "How do you know Francine?"

"I'm in this climate action group, and hey, it's been awesome. Francine has been giving us tips on strategy and, get this, group dynamics. You know, like how to stay on the same page and not tear into each other. Honestly, that's the toughest part of activism."

Roberto paused, as if he had said too much. "I'd do anything for Francine," Roberto said calmly, though his passion was obvious. As an afterthought, he said, "Francine

asked us to shut down our phones for this dinner. Just to be sure, I put mine here, after turning off the ring,” gesturing towards an area behind him. Betty put her phone there too, not mentioning that she almost never turned on the ring.

Just then, a man arrived, another guest. He was big, hefty, tough-looking, maybe in his 50s, greying hair. He said, “Is this the Francine dinner?”

Betty graciously indicated a seat. “Yes, indeed. My name’s Betty and this is Roberto.”

“G’day, I’m Ron. Pleased to meet you.” He shook each of their hands. Betty noted he was careful not to crush hers.

“Hello Ron. I just met Roberto. We were talking about how we both know Francine. It was years ago, she helped out in a campaign, trying to protect the old post office building. That’s how I know her.” She looked at Roberto, conscious that she hadn’t yet reciprocated by introducing herself.

Ron sounded sheepish and tentative, in contrast to his bodily presence. “I met Francine on a picket line a few years back. See, I’m a cop, and I was on the other side. But we had a yak and, somehow, she got through to me, and I’ve learned a lot from her, you wouldn’t believe.” He paused. “Francine said everything we talk about here stays within these walls. I’m trusting you on that.”

Betty felt a surge of excitement. What a wonderful opportunity. She started to suspect that Francine was late on purpose.

The three of them continued introductions until another guest arrived, a youngish woman, well dressed, even elegant, with immaculate black hair and beautiful skin, slim and well-spoken with a slight South Asian accent.

“The Francine dinner party, isn’t it? My pleasure. My name is Sarora.” Soon they were all comparing notes.

Sarora said, “I work in finance. Meeting Francine was a lucky accident, lucky for me. She gives me guidance, and I trust her. If you’re her friends, I trust all of you.”

They continued to share information about themselves until Francine arrived, in an uncharacteristically flustered state. “So sorry I’m late.” She looked around the table, meeting each of their eyes in turn, in her way of making contact. “There was something urgent. I couldn’t postpone it.” Betty thought, if Francine was late on purpose, she’s a good actor.

After some settling in, Francine said, “I asked Riko, our waiter, to give us about ten minutes to order. Then we can start our discussion.” Ordering took some time, to decide whether to share dishes and, if so, whether to get any meat dishes. In negotiating what to eat, they ended up all vegetarian, sharing, so they could each try out everything they ordered. It seemed the path of least resistance: they were still tiptoeing around possible differences, and Francine assured them that all the dishes were good. After giving their orders, all eyes turned to her.

“Thanks for coming, all of you. I know this is rather mysterious. There’s a reason I invited each of you, guessing it was unlikely any of you knew each other.” She looked around the table to confirm. “The real reason, it’s that you’re in completely different occupations and activities, yet share something important: a desire to make the world a better place.” This would have sounded empty coming from someone else, but Francine made it meaningful, with

her emphasis on a *better place*. Each of them knew what she meant, though each in their own personal way.

“Before we get started, how about we make some agreements?” All nodded. “You already know about keeping phones silent. We also need to agree that everything said here stays in this room, if you know what I mean.” Francine looked around the room, lingering when meeting Ron’s eyes, to see whether he felt secure. She continued, “Riko assures me that the restaurant staff here won’t be listening, but even if they did, they wouldn’t say anything, including that we’re having this meeting. Okay?” Francine made it sound almost conspiratorial. Betty assumed this was mainly for Ron’s benefit.

After a moment, Francine said, “Anything else?”

Ron said, “So, what exactly are we here for?”

“Good question. I have a plan, but can I give you some more background first?”

Betty noticed that Ron, who had been a little tense, seemed to relax as Francine continued. “Here’s the deal. We mostly do things based on what we know, or really just what we think we know. I think we might do better if we delve into what we don’t know, and try to find some answers.”

Roberto clicked. “Oh, I get it. You asked me about what we don’t know about climate campaigning, right?” The others nodded. Francine had talked with each of them in a similar vein about their own issues.

“Yes. I’m just telling you my reason for inviting you. By focusing on what we don’t know, maybe we can get a better idea of how to fill gaps in our understanding. I’m not sure how to go about it, but it oughta be interesting. And I

thought it'd be fun to bring you all together. I had to muster up some courage to do it."

Betty was surprised that Francine had ever lacked courage for anything, but on reflection wasn't surprised that Francine had said this. In admitting her own struggles, even exaggerating them, she made it easier for others to be candid.

Francine was moving on. "How about each of us speak in turn, starting with the youngest person" — looking at Roberto — "and then turning to those with more life experience." Francine's playful expression, glances and choice of words removed any hint of ageism from her proposal. There was no objection. "Roberto, are you ready to start?"

Roberto nodded and slowly looked around the table, taking in each person's expression. Then he began. "First a little bit about me. I've been putting loads of energy into climate stuff for five years now. Talking to people, going to meetings, writing letters, networking, rallies, all that ... what else? Far out, it's heaps, but the challenge is massive. It's what I try to do most, but, you know, gotta make a living too. So I do odd jobs, gardening and deliveries, stuff like that, to get by."

He had everyone's complete attention, with his sincerity and matter-of-fact delivery, and a pleasing lilt in the way he spoke. Betty thought he would be an ideal talk show host. "I won't get into what I think about the looming climate catastrophe." Roberto raised his hands and looked towards the ceiling. "It's huge. But ..." He glanced at Francine. "Francine asked me to think about a few things I don't know, what I'd like to learn more about when it comes

to climate campaigning — info, skills, understanding, whatever. I guess you could call them gaps, like gaps in what we know.”

Roberto paused, almost dramatically, looking around the table. “I picked two gaps. First one’s climate science. I haven’t studied it and I’m not planning to either. Science isn’t really my thing, so I’m happy to just follow the experts. They say the planet’s heating up and we gotta cut back on greenhouse gases, you know, carbon dioxide and all that. There’s plenty of good information out there already, that’s what I think. What I’d really like to get my head around is climate sceptics, you know, the scientists who question claims about global warming.”

Sarora interjected, “You mean climate deniers?”

“Yes, but hey, I don’t like ‘denier’. It can seem ...” Roberto searched for a word. “Disrespectful, that’s it.” Roberto remembered when he had greatly offended a friend by calling him a climate denier. “The real challenge is how to deal with these guys. It’s not climate science I’m missing, it’s how to handle the sceptics, especially the ones with degrees and fancy titles. Facts don’t seem to cut it, and saying ‘trust the science’ feels like a cop-out ’cause in other areas, science is the problem, for sure, for environmentalists.”

Sarora interjected again: “Other areas of science, what are you critical of?” Betty thought she might be doing this to help others understand.

“Yeah, like pesticides, GMOs, microwaves. A few of my mates in the activist scene are all over those debates. I’ve learned enough to see that the official science line, well it lines up with what the big corporates want, so it kinda makes sense to be sceptical. But climate science is different

'cause the corporations are trying to get people to question the official line."

Quietly, Sarora said, "And what else you don't know?"

"Sorry, sidetracked. There's plenty I don't know!" With a big grin. "The thing that got me going, well, it's hard to put into words. It seems like most people are on board with taking action against global warming — or global heating, as I like to call it. The government makes all the right noises but you can't trust it. Governments around the world ..." — Roberto gestured expansively — "they've been making agreements for years, decades really, but emissions haven't really dropped much, well not enough anyway."

Everyone around the table was nodding.

"So, what's the way forward? Do we try to get people to put more pressure on governments? Or is going after governments the wrong angle? What can I suggest to the local climate group that'll actually make a difference? There are so many good actions out there. How do we pick the 'right' one or the 'right' way to go about it? And who's meant to be advising us?"

Roberto seemed to have finished. He was looking hopefully at the others, especially Francine, but his looks of hope oscillated with looks of desperation, as if he had seen the worst and been unable to do anything.

Finally, Ron spoke. "Are you sayin' the protests in the street aren't makin' enough of a difference? I've seen the protesters, both the angry ones and the fired-up ones, and, well, ...." He trailed off. Betty guessed he was speaking from the perspective of police monitoring demonstrations.

Roberto looked appreciative. “Yeah, that’s part of it. Protests feel good, for us, that feeling of solidarity, there’s nothing quite like it.” He looked at the far wall above their heads as if remembering a protest. “But, ... but, what do we do when nothing much changes? Who’s got the answer?”

Sarora asked, “The answer, does anyone have it? Or will it just happen, because groups around the world are trying things, doing things, and we learn from them? Should we just keep trying? The answers will come?”

Roberto came back quickly. “I wish. Lots of new ideas are popping up, new strategies. But how do those like us, in a local group, how do we know what to do, what’s gonna work the best?”

Francine gently intervened. “Thanks, Roberto. You’ve explained an important area of ignorance, a knowledge gap, two actually. Good.” Betty noted that Francine had adopted the term ‘knowledge gap’. She could see that Francine wanted to move on.

Francine continued, “The idea is that we each get to tell about knowledge gaps in our own experience and somehow learn from this exchange. Roberto, you’ve provided a great start, a model really, of how to do this.”

Francine then adopted a different tone of voice, more casual. “This might be a good time for a break. It looks like our food is about to arrive. Sarora, I think you’ll be next.”

Betty was thankful for the arrival of the food. She needed to process the conversation that had just occurred. She felt a bit clearer, thanks to Roberto’s explanations, which helped her see her own challenges more clearly.

They started with individual servings of miso soup, then came vegetable don, tofu dengaku, vegan udon noodle,



agedashi and tofu teriyaki. It was all new to Betty and a welcome change from her usual diet. When they were nearly finished, Francine suggested “How about we hear from Sarora before ordering dessert, that is if anyone wants it, after eating so much?”

Sarora, looking around the table, was ready. “My parents were refugees, and I was fortunate to grow up in safety here. They’re always grateful for the security we’ve found in our new home. But over time, I started noticing the darker side — how our government isn’t doing enough to help refugees, and sometimes even worse. Now there’s more hostility towards them, stirred up by politicians and nationalist groups. I’ve wanted to do something about it, to honour my parents and the community that welcomed us.”

At this point, Betty thought that Sarora’s voice wavered, and her eyes moistened. It was obviously an emotional memory.

“The groups I’m part of, they do so much — writing letters, holding rallies, tutoring refugee kids, you name it. I work in the finance industry.” Sarora looked at the others, as if expecting a negative reaction, but it seemed she felt reassured, and she continued. “My work allows me to speak with many customers, and some of them become like friends, which helps me understand different views about refugees, about immigrants. When they see me, they ask ‘Where are you from?’ So I tell them about my parents. Some don’t say much after that, but others share their own stories, and I learn a lot from them. Since my activities have appeared in the media sometimes, I think my clients are more likely to be sympathisers than critics. But it’s complicated. Some are more sympathetic to political refugees than

economic ones, but I've realised the distinction isn't always meaningful. Look at Rupert Murdoch, the media billionaire — he took US citizenship just to make more money. But no one calls him an economic refugee!”

Everyone laughed. Sarora's story seemed to be building up to something emotional. The pressure eased a tad.

Sarora looked over at Francine. “It's time now for me to talk about my own area of ignorance. It's not easy to say what it is because there is just too much information. I read a lot, and listen to so many many podcasts. What started to interest me was the cause of the ‘refugee crisis’ we keep hearing about in the media. To me, it's quite clear that wars and exploitation are the main reasons. You know the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with millions of people forced to leave their homes. Then some of the governments fighting the wars, well they are the reason there are so many refugees, well, part of the reason, and then they put up barriers to stop refugees from those countries. They had to flee because of ...”

“What about the Ukraine war?” This was Roberto.

“A refugee story in every war. I read about Nazi Germany. If places like US and Britain had accepted Jews as immigrants, maybe Hitler wouldn't have pushed to kill them, no?”

“Surely he didn't need much pushing!” Roberto again.

Francine nimbly suggested, “Sarora, what do you want to know?”

Sarora had started to become heated, but now re-focused. “Francine, sorry, the stories of refugees make me so angry. Now, back to ... causes. As I just said, the main reasons are wars and economic exploitation, and if we could

get rid of them, the so-called problem would shrink into nothing.” Sarora glanced at Francine, and continued.

“The gap is the connection between this thinking about causes and our everyday efforts on behalf of refugees. Let’s say we welcome a refugee family into the community, help them find jobs and accommodation and skills. That’s good, worthwhile. But is it just a band-aid to cover bigger problems? Statelessness. Visa barriers.”

Everyone was listening attentively. Sarora continued. “What’s the best thing to do? What’s the balance between supporting refugees who get here, campaigning for a compassionate policy on arrivals, and addressing the causes? How about action against war, poverty, international economic exploitation?” Sarora was getting into a flow, becoming more articulate. Everyone waited for her to continue, until Francine followed up. “I can see the dilemma. It’s hard to know where to put our priorities, at least hard for me. But what’s going to help? Is there stuff we don’t know that would help us decide how to do our best?”

Sarora: “You know, what I would like is some theory, some system, to help make choices in our efforts. I’ve read about migration, how it’s influenced by economic factors, poverty and opportunity, but the authors never say anything much about what to do, except at the government level. It’s all policy. Can’t they think of community campaigners? There’s too much I want to know!”

Sarora looked around the table, and no one said anything. She was so passionate, even about what she wanted to find out.

Finally, Francine spoke. “Sarora, you’ve given us so much to think about, and so much to admire. I really value your commitment and energy.” There was murmuring of agreement from the others. “I think it’s my turn now, going from younger to older. Then Ron and Betty. Okay?” Francine looked around to make sure everyone was on board for the process, but it may have been partly to give more time after Sarora’s passion. Betty noticed that Sarora was relaxing and seemed ready to listen. When Francine spoke, they all listened.

“Since I invited you to this dinner, you might think I would have had plenty of time to think through my own contribution. Really, I’ve been thinking about ignorance, or knowledge gaps as we’ve called it, for some time. I’ve seen lots of protests and campaigns and other sorts of efforts for a better world, and thought I’d learned a fair amount about them.”

Roberto interrupted. “You have, you have, you’ve helped so much.” Sarora chimed in: “You know so much and are so generous in sharing it.”

Francine held up her hand in mock protest, smiling broadly. “Enough, thanks. But it’s strange, the more I do, the more I realise how much I don’t know. It’s satisfying to be helpful to groups, and individuals too.” Roberto interjected, “You are!” Francine smiled and continued. “But somewhere along the line, I started feeling that being helpful, or being satisfied with being helpful, was a sort of trap. Maybe I could do more, no, not more, better. If I had more insights, could I be more effective?”

“So, this gap in what you know — does it cover everything you wish you could find out?” This was Ron.

Betty was surprised at how closely he had been following the discussion.

“Thanks, Ron. Everything I wish I could know is my own sort of ignorance area, if that makes any sense, my own black hole of everything I might know. That’s way too big. A knowledge gap, for our purposes, needs to be something that we might actually fill, something we could reasonably hope to learn.”

Betty couldn’t imagine what it would be and, looking around, guessed that no one else did either. Francine continued.

“People tell me I’ve been helpful. That’s very nice. Some have said to me that no one else could have done it, or something like that. I didn’t believe it, but it made me start to worry. Why? ’Cause I don’t think of myself as all that special.”

Betty thought that only Francine could have said this and not be accused of false modesty. She was just judging herself in a factual way, reflecting on how to be more effective.

“If I’ve been as helpful as people tell me, why aren’t there others? Why aren’t there others doing the sorts of things I do?”

“A Francine twin!” “Francine clones!” “Yes!” Everyone was joining in.

She looked pleased, yet somewhat pained, with an awkward smile. “Not another me, please! That’s too competitive. No, someone who does things like me, only different, in their own way. Do you know what I mean?”

Betty felt inspired. “You mean like organising dinners like this one? Except different topics?”

“Yes, I guess so.” Francine was still trying to deal with the group’s praise. “Actually, there are lots of others with a lot of experience, just not many around here. It would be nice ...” She trailed off.

“I’d like to learn from you, to take on some new roles.” It was Roberto. Sarora chimed in: “I feel I’m already learning from you — how to change what I do.”

“Thank you, thank you. But can I give you a suggestion?” Francine was back to her usual self. “Come with me some time to visit a different campaign — not climate change, not refugees — and after we’ve learned a little about it, we can compare notes. It’s what I do; I try to pick up ideas from all over and use them or suggest them whenever they seem relevant.”

Betty felt inspired again. “Can you tell us ... how’d you get the idea to invite us here to this dinner?”

Francine paused, seeming to collect her thoughts. “I guess it was after reading something about ignorance, some academic article.”

Roberto interrupted. “Ignorant, you know, like stupid and uncultured?” He seemed to perk up at the juxtaposition of ignorance and academics.

Francine grinned. “Thanks, Roberto. No. For these academics, ignorance refers to lack of knowledge. They noted that everyone — I think ‘everyone’ really means other academics — focuses on what people know and ignores what they don’t know.”

“You mean academics don’t know everything?” Roberto was being both sarcastic and funny.

Francine smiled as she continued. "What it means, I guess, is academics ignore ignorance. Well, the study of ignorance as a subject, anyway. Does that sound confusing?"

Sarora tried to refocus the discussion. "So we should look at what researchers say on this to see how it helps?"

"Yes, I think so. Can we come back to that later? Maybe after we've heard from Ron and Betty?" Francine looked uncomfortable, as if the agenda had gotten out of her control. Betty wondered whether Francine had a tendency to try to manage things.

During a brief pause in the conversation, Riko poked her head in and asked whether they were ready for dessert. Betty guessed she was taking cues from Francine. Another aspect of control? All for a good cause. What could the others learn from Francine's efforts to steer the agenda? Did they notice? Betty actually appreciated the guidance, remembering countless meandering conversations. She'd try to ask Francine about it later. Now didn't seem the right time.

Dessert arrived. It included attractive servings of daifukumochi, mochi and finally mitarashi dango, with its rice cakes conveniently arranged in skewers of five. They chatted about current events, locally and nationally, while reflecting on what had gone on so far.

As they finished, Ron took the floor, so to speak. This wasn't Ron's usual habitat: for a change, he was not the authority in charge. Instead, Francine was their *de facto* leader, and Betty smiled at this, and at the thought of everyone sharing personal stories and feelings. Ron looked around with a combination of a copper's steely gaze and a tentativeness, even nervousness.

“I’ve been a cop for 15 years. I was pretty old when I joined, after workin’ on me dad’s farm, much older than other recruits. I’d been thinkin’ about joinin’ for years, but it’s not exactly what I expected. As a cop, we see the worst sides of people — the thieves, the abusers — and we see ’em at their worst. We also see the victims, and a lot of the time, it’s the worst day of their lives, when they’re hurt, or someone close to ’em is. It’s tough to deal with without gettin’ hard-hearted, and it’s easy to start thinkin’ the worst of the bad ones, especially when the courts just put ’em back on the streets and they do it all over again.”

The others were listening, fascinated.

“A few years back, I decided to do some courses at the uni here and got into reading a bit about criminology. Now, I’d already done plenty of study to become a cop and get promoted, but this was different. Anyway, I started lookin’ at policing and the criminal justice system with a more critical eye. Some of the books were real eye-openers. You ever heard of Nils Christie, the Norwegian criminologist?”

Ron glanced over at Francine and must have realised that he was getting off track. “Anyway, my perspective started to shift, but it was tough ’cause no one around me had a clue, and if they did, they’d reckon I’d gone bonkers. Though I did come across a few other cops online who were questioning policing in one way or another.”

Ron had relaxed. He had started stiffly but now was in full flow. Betty imagined that he would have been good at talking with members of the public when on the job.

“Knowledge gaps, that’s what we’re talkin’ about, and I’ve gotta say, I’ve learned a lot listening to Roberto, Sarora and Francine. You’ve really got me thinking. But to be



honest, I'd been thinking about this for a while, ever since I met Francine. It was on a picket line — you might've heard about it, the hotel dispute — it was a few years back. Anyway, after readin' some of this critical criminology stuff, I reckon I was more open than I would've been before. So, when Francine said g'day and started to chat, well, it just kinda went from there."

"I think you took the initiative in that conversation." Francine tried to play down her role.

Ron winked at Francine. "You see, the cops have a really tough job, caught between all sorts of pressures. Most of the officers I know — and I've known a fair few over the years — are good people. It used to be that we weren't the most educated lot, and only the poorer students would join up. That wasn't ideal. But times have changed, and the new recruits are mostly a lot better in all sorts of ways — more knowledgeable, tolerant and genuinely concerned."

Roberto said, "I think most cops at climate protests are actually on side. They're just doing their jobs. Right?"

Ron smiled. "Yeah, one of the challenges is enforcing the law even when the law, or how it's carried out, is a bit dodgy. From the inside, you see so many double standards. Street criminals cop harsh penalties. Sure, what they've done is terrible, but when you look at their lives, it's clear they need help. That's not the biggest issue, though. The real problem is how little attention there is to the big-time criminals, mostly white-collar types."

Sarora asked, "Do you really think white-collar crime doesn't get enough attention? I read plenty of media stories about kingpins, financial crime."

Ron: “Quite right. There are some successes. Seen from the inside, they are the exceptions. Much more serious high-level crime is never touched. We get the word from on high. Some figures are untouchable.”

Francine: “Is there a knowledge gap? Is it because no one knows how to tackle it? Or choose not to?”

Ron tried to collect his thoughts. “There are so many issues and factors, it’s tough to lay them all out clearly, and I really appreciate you all listening like you are. You’d be surprised how rare it is for officers to have a chance to speak openly with folks outside the force about our challenges and dilemmas. That’s why I genuinely appreciated having a chat with you, Francine.” By this time, Ron was speaking mainly to Francine.

“For me, the knowledge gap is really about the gap between ‘theory and practice’, like the academics say. It’s partly about the difference between prevention and punishment. There’s all this criminology theory that’s pretty insightful and even exciting in showing alternatives. But then there’s the daily grind — routine police stuff, sniffer dogs, robberies, paperwork — that doesn’t seem to connect with those alternatives. In the end, it comes down to ‘What should I do?’”

As Ron paused, looking around, and showing some frustration, Sarora gently asked, “Ron, sir, you mean what you should do day-to-day to move towards the alternative? To change the system. Actually, can you tell us more about the alternative you’re thinking of?”

Sarora’s question energised Ron. “One of the ideas I’ve come across is restorative justice. Instead of just arresting and trying criminals the usual way, you get offenders

face to face with their victims. I've read that it can be really powerful in changing behaviour. It helps victims feel like they've been heard. But I'm wondering, what can I do to push for something like this when it's not really on the agenda here?"

It was Roberto's turn to probe. "Couldn't you circulate info about restorative justice, talk about it with other cops, join a group ...?" He trailed off.

Ron seemed even more frustrated. "Yeah, thanks, Roberto. Those definitely are possibilities, and I've thought about them and even tried to start a few conversations. But I quickly realised I'd lose all credibility if I pushed too hard. There's so much pressure to conform on the force. What I'd really like is some kind of guide or framework to help me bridge the gap between practice and theory. Why don't legal scholars come up with something for that?"

Everyone was watching Ron, whose frustration was now mixed with perplexity. Francine finally said, "Could you tell the others what you told me, about trying to find others who think like you do?"

"Yeah, I looked online for anyone else dealing with similar dilemmas. I always did this at home because our machines at the station are probably monitored, or at least I think they are. Anyway, eventually, I found a few others with similar concerns and had a few tentative exchanges, being careful not to overstep. One thing I've learned is to keep a low profile 'cause going public with anything that doesn't sit well with higher-ups can be a disaster. It usually means losing any chance to make an impact. But how can I make a difference if stepping off the official line, even just a bit, makes me stand out like a sore thumb?"

Roberto asked, “Hey, aren’t some of the newer, younger cops, aren’t they bringing in new ideas?”

“Yeah, you’re spot on. There’s hope in the next generation. But change moves so slowly, and the old guard does everything they can to block it or bend it to suit their own interests. Let me tell you about what one of the younger lads on the force tried to do.”

As Ron continued with his story, Betty at first thought he just liked to talk and then thought it was just that Ron had never had a chance to speak so freely with a sympathetic audience. Finally, when Ron paused for breath, she jumped in. “Ron, this is so so interesting and I’d like to hear more, another time — I hope there’s another time — but could you say more about what’s not working?”

Ron pulled up. Betty’s comment, so politely put, quickly brought him around. “Thanks, Betty. This is pretty unusual for me, being with a group like this — I got a bit carried away. You’re right, it’s all about what we don’t know, our knowledge gaps.”

Francine then said, “Ron, it’s my fault. I got you off track. You have so much I’d like to hear.” Betty thought, it wasn’t Francine’s fault at all. She’s just trying to make Ron feel relaxed.

Ron continued. “Well, what do I want to know? Basically, it’s some sort of guide or framework, a set of criteria, to help folks like me — people on the force who’ve got a vision for an alternative — figure out what to do. I know there are options. I could write a memoir, but what’s the point? How would that help? I could resign, but then what? Right now, I’m just reading more criminology and getting more frustrated because I can’t figure out how to

connect those great ideas to the reality of the here and now. I feel like I need an interpreter, someone who explains it all.”

“Bravo, Ron.” It was Roberto, who also gave a thumbs-up. Ron might have thought it was sarcastic — he had encountered too many uppity young men in his duties — but he could see that Roberto was genuine, and felt a surge of good feeling. He could see the others were also pleased.

Francine had been taking notes. She paused, and said, “Can you excuse me for a few minutes? Betty, you go ahead and start. There’s something I’ve got to do.” Then she got up and walked out.

Betty said, “Maybe Francine already heard what I have to say.”

Sarora: “We wait until she returns, no? Somehow I like us all together for every one of us. While we wait, could someone tell me their opinion about ...” Sarora wasn’t sure what topic would go down well. “Ron, you’re the first police officer I’ve met this way. Are there others locally to meet?” They started talking about police officers, and others, who they knew, or knew about.

Eventually Francine returned, settled in and realised Betty hadn’t started. At a break in the conversation, she said, abruptly, “Betty, just tell your story like we discussed.”

Betty was nervous but was glad for Francine’s prompt. “My husband and I, we were married forty-two years. We gave up trying to have kids. That’s okay, I got used to it. We had a good life together. He passed seven years ago ...” Here her voice trembled and she blinked to prevent tears,

but was able to continue. “My health hasn’t been the best lately. I can still walk alright, but about 18 months ago I moved into a care home. It’s not too bad, really; I’m better off than most of them there. Sometimes I wonder if I should’ve pushed a bit harder to stay on my own, but it got too much in the end.”

“When Francine found out where I was, oh, she was such a help. Gave me a few ideas on how to handle the staff. Most of them try their best, but they’re overworked and underpaid. Some of them, though ... well, you know, I’d rather not have much to do with them.”

Francine prompted, “Could you give us one or two examples? Like we discussed?”

“Well, there’s this one nurse — she’s sort of like Francine’s evil twin.” Francine grinned and nodded for Betty to go on. “She seems to get some joy out of upsetting the residents. Poor thing, she’s probably had a rough life, but she’s taking it out on everyone around her. I got so angry when she ‘accidentally’ spilled medicine on one of the residents. And, you know, it looked to me like she was trying to hide a smile after it happened.”

“Horrible!” Sarora almost yelled. Betty was about to pause to let her continue, but Francine signalled to go ahead. Later, as Betty replayed the episode in her mind, she imagined that this anecdote had reminded Sarora of the abuse of refugees.

Betty continued. “Oh, my little problems are nothing compared to what you lot are dealing with, and I wouldn’t want to trouble you with them, not usually. But Francine was so kind, and I just wanted to do the right thing by her. That’s why I’m here.”

They were all about to speak. Roberto got in first. "Betty — tell us more!"

"Righto." Betty paused, collecting her thoughts. "After I told Francine about a few things going on at the home, she suggested I start a diary — to record everything I saw, with dates and times and who was there, sort of like a detective." Betty glanced at Ron, who looked pleased. "After a few weeks, I could see some patterns. Like, when the shift changed and a certain nurse was in a bad mood and there weren't many others around, that was prime time for nasty incidents."

"I didn't want to be a dobber, collecting evidence to run off and tell the higher-ups. Most of it wasn't anything serious, at least not on purpose, and anyway I guessed it was part of the usual goings-on, and anyway what would anyone do about it? Then I had an idea. Francine, with her diary idea, got me thinking like a detective, and I thought, why not try a different sort of detective work? By being ..." Betty paused, her eyes drifting as she searched for the right word. "By being different ... being a ... a chameleon, acting in different ways at different times to see what would happen."

Turning to Ron, she asked, "Do detectives do that?" Ron shook his head. "Usually, we're trained to play it straight and neutral, at least at the start, with everyone we interview. Of course, we adapt based on the situation."

Betty felt chuffed. "Well, maybe I was being a different kind of detective. You see, I did a bit of theatre work when I was younger. Maybe that's what gave me the idea. I could pretend to be upset, or funny, or even a bit down,

and just see how people reacted. It was a real eye-opener. But I wasn't sure how to make sense of it all."

Betty paused, and Roberto said, "Keep going."

"It's not all that exciting, to be honest — it's actually pretty boring. But let me cut to the chase. It's simple. I started wondering whether anyone ever tried something like this in an aged care home, and knew enough to guide me, sort of like being an undercover agent. I'm not educated like you lot — I've got no idea. But you've helped me think maybe someone's looked into this sort of thing before. And if they haven't, well, that'd be interesting, wouldn't it?"

Francine immediately responded. "Yes, indeed. Thank you so much for your contribution, Betty, and thank you all for coming and sharing your stories. This has been inspiring for me, if that makes any sense considering we've each talked about what we don't know." Francine said this so kindly that Betty didn't mind that it ended her segment without her question being answered. Actually, she felt relieved.

Sarora was the first to comment. "Thank you, Francine. It is a remarkable journey, to hear our stories. I've learned so much, especially about my own!"

Roberto joined in. "I agree absolutely. It's so unusual, ... so good." Then he switched to a question. "You told us already about the ignorance connection. But why us in particular? Of everyone you know, and you know a lot of people, why'd you choose us?"

Francine smiled. "Oh, it wasn't my original idea, at least not completely. Not so long ago I was reading a book by someone named Kasley Killam, I even remember the title, *The Art and Science of Connection*. Well, to be honest,



I only read the introduction, but in one place she told about bringing together a group from different generations. That's us. I just added the topic of ignorance and how to go about making a change. That's all!"

It was Ron's turn. He looked around the table. "I want to thank you all. I can't remember a time when I felt so secure, in terms of trust, with strangers who are no longer strangers. It's a bit of a strange feeling, really, to feel this kind of connection."

Francine said, "Betty, do you have any comments before I say a few final words?"

Betty shook her head, lost for words, but her positive feelings were obvious.

After a pause, Francine continued. "I'd like to think of this meeting as the beginning of an exploration, a quest if you like. We've identified areas of ignorance, ones we'd like answers to. The next question is how we go about finding answers, that is if there are any. Maybe we could get together another time to talk about that."

Roberto commented, with a mischievous grin, said, "I bet you've got some ideas already."

Francine was deadpan: "I do, but I think it would be better for each of us to think of ideas separately, and then share them, sort of like we did tonight. Okay?"

Roberto: "Can you send us some, um, guidelines, or maybe a question to think about?"

Francine: "I'll do that. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go. Thank you all again."

As she departed, Betty wondered whether Francine really had to leave or was doing it so the rest of us could connect better. Or maybe Francine was having a chat with

Riko and the other restaurant staff who had been so accommodating.

While they were preparing to leave, and making small talk, Ron spoke to Betty. “Could I take you home?” “How kind of you, but I can walk. It’s not far.” “How bout I walk with you?” Betty nodded. Either Ron was being protective, or he had something to say to her, or maybe both.

## 2

# Filling gaps

It was nearly a month later and Betty was again looking for the meeting place. This time it was a café, and they were meeting mid-morning.

Francine had been in touch a couple of times, following up after the dinner at Maki Magic. She mainly asked about events at the care home. Betty had continued to keep a diary and, on Francine's request, had made a copy for Francine, who didn't trust the staff. What if they stole or destroyed what Betty had written? It didn't seem likely, but it wasn't much trouble, and Francine seemed very interested and concerned. Betty figured that Francine must know a lot, being a nurse.

Francine also reminded her to think of how to fill her knowledge gap, but this hadn't seemed all that important. Betty thought, I know what I'll say, and it'll be nice to see the others.

The café was small and inconspicuous, and she almost walked right by it until she noticed Francine at the back waving. There was a display case with pastries and sweets, a few scattered seats and a small table at the back. Francine beckoned her to join them at the table. A few days ago, when Francine had told her about the meeting, she had asked, "Do you like fruit tarts?", and now there was one at the only vacant chair.

Roberto and Sarora were deep in conversation but when they saw her, they smiled and Roberto rose to his feet. Such a respectful young man! He seemed even taller than before but was dressed more casually, almost perhaps consciously unkempt. Sarora, on the other hand, was nicely dressed in corporate attire, with her hair attractively styled. Probably she had dipped out from her office job.

Francine signalled to the single café worker, who soon was bringing coffee and tea for each of them, obviously arranged in advance. Roberto and Sarora went back to talking with each other, and Betty wondered whether they had a deeper connection, or maybe it was just that they were young and had more in common.

Francine could also see what was happening, and interrupted by getting straight to business. She was sitting forward in her seat, suggesting urgency, but when she spoke she sounded relaxed and unhurried. “Thank you all for coming. This is everyone. Ron wasn’t able to make it. We have just one small agenda item. How do we go about filling knowledge gaps, you know, those areas of ignorance important to us? Betty, would you like to start?”

Betty might have felt put on the spot, but Francine had warned her, saying she should just be herself and not worry, as whatever she said would be valuable. Even though it all seemed abrupt, Betty was about to speak when Roberto jumped in, looking pointedly at Francine. “How bout we start with a check-in?” Francine quickly adjusted. “Yes, you’re right, we should take it a bit slower. Roberto, can you start?”

Roberto looked more confident, sitting fully erect and full of energy. “Betty, maybe you know this already. A

check-in is when we all have a chance to see how we're all going."

Betty just nodded. She sort of understood but was pleased Roberto was going first.

"I'm pretty pumped right now. Our climate group had a meeting, and we've got some new members, heaps of energy, and all sorts of plans."

Sarora immediately followed, obviously knowing what was expected. "Right now I'm in a sort of holding pattern. Not much action on the refugee front, and emotionally I'm holding it together, which is okay, I guess, compared to some other times." Betty hadn't previously realised that Sarora had struggled with mental-health issues. How brave of Sarora to reveal this.

Francine went next. "I've been busy, as usual, and sometimes feeling flustered. There are so many bad things happening in the world, and I hear about so many people's problems. I've had to tell myself to slow down, not to put the weight of the world on my shoulders. Does that make sense?"

Roberto and Sarora nodded, and all eyes turned to Betty. "Well, life in the home's pretty routine, nothing too exciting, really. I've been keeping up with my diary entries, which I told you about before. Not much else to say, to be honest."

Francine took charge. "Thank you, Betty. You've already started on our agenda." Francine smiled appreciatively as she said this. "As you know, ... when you know something, it's not a knowledge gap!" Francine could be playful at times. "As you know, our task today is not to fill

gaps, but just to lay out some ways we could go about filling them. Betty?”

“All I could think of to do was ask people I know, and Francine, you’re the first person who came to mind. Sorry not to come up with anything useful.”

“But it is useful, Betty. Asking friends, asking people you know. I’ve started a list.”

Roberto excitedly added, “Betty, you’ve already told about another way — doing your own research. Hey, that’s just what you’ve been doing by keeping a diary and trying out different ways of dealing with the others at your home. It’s genius!”

Betty was pleased, though she didn’t fully understand why it was so important, and waited to hear from others.

Roberto continued. “Betty is doing her own personal investigation. It’s do-it-yourself research. We can do the same thing in our group. It’s like having a team of researchers. There’s one more thing I wanna bring up: studying published research, like what climate scientists do. We don’t have the skills or resources for, you know, things like computer simulations, so we just read what they publish.”

As he spoke, a grim, puzzled expression spread across Roberto’s face. He was such a vibrant, personable fellow, Betty thought, but perhaps underneath he had worries like the rest of us. Francine picked up on this, asking “What is it, Roberto?”

“Here’s the thing. You know how I hate relying on scientists as authorities, when so many of ’em are influenced by their funding sources. They go where the money is. But climate scientists seem different, ’cause the biggest money pot, the fossil-fuel industry, is against ’em. But does

that mean we should trust 'em without question? Maybe that's my personal blind spot: figuring out when it's safe to trust scientists."

Francine noticed that Sarora looked ready to say something, and indicated for her to comment. Sarora said, "I feel for you, Roberto. But do we need to sort this out right now? Our task is to map methods of filling areas of ignorance. So how would you go about filling your personal ... blind spot?"

Roberto seemed relieved, but then puzzled again. "I'm not sure. Can we come back to it?"

Sarora, thinking that Francine would want to go last, felt it was her turn. "One thing we can do is to find out whether someone has already studied whatever it is. You know, maybe there's not really a gap. We just need to find out."

"But how?" Roberto had reengaged.

"Betty suggested talking with Francine. Well, we can talk to anyone who might know, to experts in the field."

Francine now commented. "How are you going to find out who's an expert? What do you usually do when you don't know something?"

Sarora knew immediately what Francine was suggesting. "Search the Internet, of course."

Roberto jumped in. "There's heaps of scientific articles online. It's how I check out the latest climate stuff."

Francine summarised: "Great. We can ask experts and we can look up scientific articles. Which comes first?"

Sarora: "Do we need to decide this now? Doesn't it depend?"

Roberto: “Francine’s trying to get us thinking about how we fill in our ignorance holes. How do we figure out who’s an expert? We can check out their articles! Ever had a look at Google Scholar?”

Francine interrupted before Roberto could continue, glancing from him to Betty. “Can you explain?” Betty appreciated that Francine was trying to make sure she was following the conversation. She had heard of Google — who hadn’t? — but not about Google Scholar. Betty caught Roberto’s eye and said, “Yes, please.”

Roberto paused, thinking how to start. “Say you read an article about climate change in a scientific journal, you know like a magazine for experts. The authors will list other articles in footnotes or a bibliography, kinda like the further reading at the end of some books. Actually, I’ve got an example in my backpack.”

Roberto pulled out some papers and riffled through them until he found the one he wanted. It was only a few pages long. He turned to the end where there was a long list of items. “Check this one out, the one on top. It starts with Allen, T. and then ...”

Sarora interrupted. “What’s Allen T?”

Roberto slowed down. “Allen is the last name of the author. T is the initial of the author’s first name, you know like Thomas or Tania. After ‘Allen, T.’ there’s other information: the title of the article, the journal where it was published, and some other info. It’s just the first item in a list.”

Sarora prompted, “A bibliography?”

“Yeah, it’s a list of references, sources — and when ‘Allen, T.’ is listed, the author Allen gets what’s called a



citation. When lots of authors refer to the same 'Allen, T.' article, that means it's got loads of citations."

Betty looked puzzled. Wasn't a citation like a traffic ticket? It was all so strange, something she never knew about.

Roberto summed up. "What it means is that scientists writing papers refer to other scientists writing papers."

Roberto, seeing Betty was having trouble, tried again. "Here's an example — Albert Einstein." Betty nodded. "Einstein wrote articles about his theory of relativity, right? Even now, when someone writes about relativity, they might include Einstein's articles in their references. Every time they do, that's another citation for Einstein."

Betty tried to imagine counting up citations but couldn't get a picture in her mind. But she nodded anyway. It was best not to interrupt the proceedings. However, Roberto seemed to be enjoying himself, explaining something he had recently learned.

"All the citations get added up, and you can check the totals on Google Scholar. Just search for an article — like one of Einstein's — and Google Scholar will show you how many other articles have cited it, meaning they've included it in their references. And you can even click to see every single one of these other articles."

Sarora asked, "The more citations the better, right? It means others think the article is important?"

"Yeah, right, though you might be cited 'cause you're wrong!"

Francine quietly asked, "So how does Google Scholar help us find experts?"

Roberto quickly shifted gears. “At first guess, the scientist who gets more citations is probably more of an expert in their field. You can figure out their field by looking at the titles of their articles and the journals they’re published in. This article here is from *Nature Climate Change*. It got a ton of attention when it came out and already has loads of citations, even though it’s only two years old.”

Francine: “For now, can we just write down ‘Ask an expert’ as one option?”

Nods all around. Betty wasn’t sure she understood about citations but asking an expert seemed sensible. Also, she realised there needed to be a way to figure out who was an expert, and all this stuff about Google Scholar must have something to do with it.

At this point, the one worker at the café dropped by to ask whether they would like something. They each ordered a small sweet or another drink. It seemed only fair since they were occupying the only table in the venue. While Roberto and Sarora were ordering, Betty whispered to Francine, “Think I could say something?” Francine just smiled, nodded and gestured in a way that suggested “Leave it to me.”

Soon after, while the worker was bringing their order, Francine said, “I think Betty has something to say.” Betty felt she should have had the courage on her own, but appreciated Francine’s support.

“Thanks for explaining all that about articles and citations and whatnot. I’m not sure I quite get it, but there’s actually something else I wanted to ask.”

Roberto and Sarora were now paying attention. Francine's support made a difference.

"When I was a kiddie, we used to have eggs nearly every day. They were our bread and butter, if you know what I mean. Dad used to tell us how he'd have steak and eggs for brekky every morning. But then something changed, and everyone was told not to have too many eggs, or anything with cholesterol. No more steak for breakfast after that. We still had eggs, but we sometimes felt like maybe they weren't that good for us. Then, more recently — don't ask me for dates or who said what, I just can't remember — it seemed like eggs were okay again."

Roberto slipped in a supportive comment: "As long as they're free range."

Betty smiled and continued. "I'm not quite sure what I'm tryin' to say. It's just that, when we talk about what we know and what we don't know, and I thought about eggs, there was this little voice in my head saying 'What about eggs?' Was there a knowledge gap that went away and then came back, or what ...?" Betty trailed off and looked hopefully at the others, and a little apprehensively. Had she made a fool of herself? She trusted that Francine would come to the rescue if she had.

Surprisingly, it was Sarora who commented, just before Roberto could speak. "Betty, you've identified an issue that has been bothering me, too, and your egg example is perfect, I really like it. We've been talking about knowledge gaps, or Roberto's ignorance holes, but what about knowledge that's wrong?"

Roberto was bursting to speak. "Betty, you're a genius." Turning to Sarora: "You too Sarora. A knowledge

gap assumes our current knowledge is spot on, but as scientists keep saying — I don't necessarily buy it, but hey — knowledge is always tentative, and can be proven wrong. That just makes our task even bigger."

Betty thought their enthusiasm was exaggerated for her benefit, but was pleased all the same, and was emboldened. "Francine, what do you think?"

All eyes were on Francine, but before speaking she took a sip of her drink. "Betty's point is important. We do need to factor in the possibility, even the likelihood, that current knowledge is wrong. But let me take you back to our dinner last month. Remember Ron's story? In what way was there knowledge that might have been wrong?"

Betty remembered the dinner, the highlight of her life in recent weeks, and Ron walking home with her, and so she had thought about Ron's story, and felt like she must have rehearsed an answer to Francine's question, because it just came out of her mouth: "Ron's gap was between what he called theory and practice, between criminology and his daily grind. Could either one of those be wrong?"

Roberto was irrepressible. "Betty, you're a genius! If the gap is between — or maybe among — other knowledge, it's that other knowledge that might be, potentially could be, suspect." Roberto was almost stumbling over his words in his enthusiasm.

Sarora chimed in, "Yes, yes, we need to expand beyond gaps." Betty listened, bemused by the fuss. It didn't seem all that special. Roberto and Sarora looked at Francine, for approval, and Francine finally said, "Yes, I agree, this is important. I've written this down. But for our meeting today, can we focus on ways to deal with

knowledge gaps? My guess is that the same ways will apply to knowledge that is ... let's say ... wrong or mistaken. Okay?"

It seemed that Francine had more to say, and she did, after a pause. "Can I summarise what we've come up with so far? For dealing with what we don't know? One option is do-it-yourself, an expanded version of what Betty's been doing. Another is asking others, and which others? Anyone, potentially, but experts are good prospects. I think there's another one, which you raised indirectly, Roberto, when you explained about Google Scholar and citations." She waited briefly to see whether Roberto would take this up, but he said nothing, so she continued. "We can read scientific articles ourselves."

Sarora: "Yes, it's obvious isn't it? But how do we get these articles and how do we understand them?"

Roberto seemed to wake from a reverie. "Yeah, it's pretty obvious. We can use Google Scholar to find the articles with the biggest impact, or we could just ask experts. But Sarora's spot on. Just 'cause an article is listed on Google Scholar or wherever doesn't mean we can get a copy, and then understanding it is another story. Some of the climate articles, I can barely get what the title even means, so I usually look for a plain-language summary."

Betty had just about been able to follow the conversation, and now said, "It sounds like filling a knowledge gap isn't all that easy. I can barely cotton on to what you've been saying as it is."

Francine came to the rescue again, with a summary: "Quite right, Betty. But we don't need to fill any gaps straightaway. Today we're just listing ways to go about it,

and I think we might have a good enough list to start with.” She glanced at her notepad. “Do it yourself. Ask someone, maybe an expert. Read articles ourselves, with two aspects, obtaining them and understanding them. Any others?”

Roberto was thinking ahead. “What are our next steps?”

Sarora: “We could each choose one of these ways, the ones Francine wrote down, and explore what’s involved.”

Francine looked pleased. “What a good idea! Can I make some suggestions?”

“Righto.” “Yes please.” Roberto and Sarora spoke at the same time.

“Roberto, could you explore the challenge, for people like us, of trying to understand an academic article?” Roberto was about to speak but Francine continued. “I know you’ve looked at climate articles, but I’d really like you to try on a different sort of article. It’s one I found recently and wish I knew how to tackle it efficiently. Okay?”

“I’ll give it a go. You’ll send it to me?”

“Will do. And there’s something else. I suggest that you obtain assistance from someone with an academic background. Do you know anyone who’s done research in sociology or political science?”

Roberto slowly shook his head, obviously trawling his memory.

“Well, I know someone who might be willing to help, if I ask him. Can I put you in touch?”

Roberto now looked somewhat apprehensive, but also determined. “Bring it on!”

“That’s the spirit.” Francine switched her attention. “Sarora, I have a different idea for you, and it’s hard to explain here. It’s also about understanding, but at a more general level. With your engagement with perspectives on refugees, I think you can handle it, better than me. Can I explain it to you separately?”

Sarora, smiling broadly: “Roberto has taken up the challenge, so how can I refuse? This sounds intriguing.”

Francine said “Excellent, I’ll be in touch” and turned to Betty. Betty worried that Francine might expect too much of her, but also trusted Francine’s judgement.

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet, and you can talk to her about accessing academic articles. You don’t do this normally, so you’re the ideal person to ask basic questions and request simple solutions.” Seeing Betty’s open expression, Francine concluded, “You’ll be fine. Whatever happens will be fine.”

Betty relaxed. Francine usually knew best, even how to learn from failure. Betty wondered what was coming next, and missed some of the concluding conversation. The others were finalising plans. Whatever was ahead, it was a welcome diversion from everyday life at the home.

### 3

## Reading Bramsen

Roberto walked his bike through the park on the way to the meeting. A sociologist at the university had agreed to help him, and had suggested a bench in the park, near a stand of trees, with a playground not far away. It was a warm pleasant day, late in the afternoon. A gentle wind rustled the leaves and shouts of the children rang in the distance. A strange place to meet, Roberto thought, away from the academic environment, but when thinking of climate futures it somehow seemed appropriate, with the children representing the future and the trees an alternative to fossil fuels.

Professor Pavel Brzezicki sat on the bench with a bicycle next to him. A fellow cyclist, Roberto thought, impressed. Brzezicki looked unremarkable, with an angular face and slightly greying hair. He was casually dressed, with a brown backpack by his side. He had been reading from a sheet of paper. Roberto guessed it was the article they had come to discuss.

As Roberto approached, Brzezicki looked up at him. “Professor Brzezicki, I presume?” Roberto, stretching out his hand, couldn’t resist this allusion to Stanley and Livingstone. Well, he was searching for someone. He had looked online to find out how to pronounce Brzezicki and hoped he had gotten it right.



“Roberto, I presume?” Brzezicki smiled as they shook hands. After some talk about cycling and the beautiful weather, Brzezicki said, “Look, you can call me Pav. This is my outdoor office.” He gestured towards the park and the sky. “Did you read the article I sent?” Pav had sent Roberto an article by Isabel Bramsen titled “How civil resistance succeeds (or not),” published in 2018 in the academic journal *Peace & Change*, and agreed to help Roberto tackle it.

Roberto had made an effort. It was new territory.

Pav said, “You’re probably wondering why I chose this article.” Roberto nodded. “My colleague Sarah asked me to help you ... let me see ... with the general process of trying to understand an academic article, when it’s not in your field. So in some ways it doesn’t matter what article we work on.” Pav squinted, seeming to make a decision. “Tell me what you understood about it.”

Roberto hesitated.

Pav said, “The title. What does it mean, do you think?”

“Well, right away I wasn’t sure about ‘civil resistance’, so I looked it up online. It sounds like all the things we’re doing for the climate.”

“Can you tell me what they are?” Pav sounded genuinely interested.

“Yeah, so we give talks at schools, send letters to polities, organise demos and pull off stunts to give fossil-fuel execs a bit of a rise. We even go door-knocking sometimes. Not everyone’s keen to chat, but it’s all good, and we get a few new members. And, yeah ...” Roberto paused, then seeing Pav’s receptive expression, he continued.

“Some of us, only a few, get involved in direct action. You know, tagging stuff and jamming glue in locks. A

group locked themselves down at the entrance to the coal loader. That was pretty full-on.”

Pav smiled. “It sounds great — exciting. It must feel good. Does it?”

Roberto felt appreciated. “It’s a real buzz. The best part’s standing up for what we believe in, all of us in it together. But chatting with locals is pretty good too, in a different way, even the ones who wanna have a go at us.”

Pav: “I feel like I’m missing out on the action.” He looked at the article, refocusing. “Now, which of the actions you just described do you think Bramsen would call ‘civil resistance’?”

“All of them!”

“All? Why do you say that?”

“Well, when I looked up civil resistance, they talked about a bloke called Gene Sharp. He listed 198 methods — I even remember the number — things like rallies, petitions, strikes, that sorta stuff.”

“So all those are methods of civil resistance?”

Pav’s probing started to make Roberto question his assertions. “Well, I guess. They don’t use violence. Isn’t that what it’s all about?”

“So, what about voting? What about wearing a T-shirt with a political slogan? Are they methods of civil resistance?”

“Maybe, because they don’t use violence ...” Roberto looked for help from Pav.

“Okay, Roberto, here’s something I found out reading a bit more about the topic. Gene Sharp, yes, he listed 198 methods of what he called nonviolent action, but he was mainly concerned with repressive regimes, you know like

the Nazis. If you signed a petition against the Nazis, back in Nazi Germany, you were risking your life. The point is that Sharp distinguished between three things, violent action, nonviolent action and conventional politics. Which of these are risky?”

Roberto reflected on his experiences in climate campaigning. “Most of what we do isn’t that risky, you know? Lobbying, voting, rallies ... that’s just standard politics, right?” Pav smiled, so Roberto continued. “But when we block the factory gates, when we lock down, now that’s risky. We know we might get arrested.”

“Okay, Roberto, now what political movement is Bramsen writing about?”

“Yeah, the Arab Spring, like resistance to the Egyptian government, it was a dictatorship, right? Are you saying that what counts as civil resistance kinda depends on what you’re up against? Far out, that’s complicated.”

“What’s complicated?”

“Well, the same method, like a petition, might be civil resistance in Nazi Germany, or Egypt, but not here when we’re campaigning.”

“Why is that complicated? What’s complicated about it?”

Roberto looked towards a couple walking through the park, but didn’t see them. “Bramsen’s writing about civil resistance over there, the Middle East, and here I am trying to figure out how it applies to our climate group.”

Pav was pleased. He had led Roberto to an important understanding: it’s possible to apply insights from one issue to another. But rather than congratulate Roberto, he kept his

feelings to himself and pushed forward. “Very good. How’d you go with the abstract?”

“The abstract?”

“It’s the block of text below the title, starting ‘The article analyzes the micro-sociological dynamics’. In most journals, it’s explicitly identified with a sub-title. *Peace & Change* just shows it with smaller type.”

“Abstract, as opposed to concrete?” Roberto was perplexed.

“Sorry, in academic-speak, abstract is just another word for summary.”

Roberto showed his relief. “I could mostly follow the abstract, but I wasn’t sure about ‘micro-sociological dynamics’. Is it important? Should I look up every term I can’t understand as I go?”

“That’s a good question! Normally I read the abstract to get a general idea about what it’s all about, and I don’t worry about unfamiliar words as long as I can get the general drift.”

“Then what?”

“Most commonly, that’s it. I glance through the abstract and decide the article isn’t interesting. Sorry, I mean, it might be really interesting, but it’s not something I need to know about.” Roberto scrunched his forehead in a characteristic puzzled look, which Pav now recognised, so he continued.

“Most academics, most of the time, don’t read academic papers, at least not carefully. They just read enough to decide whether it’s something they need to know about, and usually it isn’t. I can scan through the table of contents of a journal issue and, just on the title alone,

dismiss most of the articles, or rather pick out one or two that might be worth looking at. For those, I read the abstract. If it's relevant to my current projects, I might read more."

Roberto seemed surprised about Pav's comment. Just then, a small dog ran up to them and sat waiting expectantly. A middle-aged woman came up to them, blurting out apologies and comments. "Sorry to bother you. Muffy gets so enthusiastic, and he seems to like you. You two seem really busy. Father and son?"

Roberto was lost for words, but Pav was suave in his response. He stood up and nodded towards her. "This young man and I are studying an article that interests us greatly. We're not related. It's nice of you to think that we might be."

Roberto decided to get up too, and asked, "Do you walk here often? It's beautiful today, isn't it? But maybe too warm for this time of year. Have you noticed the climate changing?" He was getting into activist mode.

"Oh dear, this seems very serious. I'd better be getting on. Muffy needs her exercise." She called the dog to her and walked away, glancing back at them.

Roberto said, "I really gotta work on how to chat with people. That was a missed chance."

Pav smiled. "Perhaps so, but not every conversation needs to be about social issues. Maybe ... is there some value in having ordinary conversations, to learn where people are at?"

"Yeah, right. My mistake was pushing too hard. In our group, we talk about building relationships. Once you've got that connection, then you can bring up the issues. But

maybe ... It's kinda hard to connect with someone so different ... Anyway, where were we?"

Pav saw more about where Roberto was coming from. "I had just told you I often read just the abstract to a paper, sometimes just the title."

Roberto felt invigorated. "That's wild. I spent heaps of time getting through this article. So you think it's not necessary?"

Pav took a while to answer. He looked in the direction of the departed dog-walker. "It depends. A lot. It depends on your purpose. What are you trying to get out of it? And it depends on what you know already." He continued, feeling comfortable with Roberto. "When I was just starting out doing research, sometimes I'd study an article carefully, very carefully indeed, even reading it several times. That was good training, even when the article was not directly in my area. Gradually, after years, I could make judgements more quickly. So now I hardly ever read every word in an article, only when I'm ... when I'm using the author's work in a detailed way ... which can mean I'm wanting to expose its shortcomings."

"You mean like a critical analysis?"

"Yes, exactly. Like what you do when someone challenges climate science."

"Yeah, we run into sceptics sometimes. Most of the time, you can just ignore them, but ... there's this guy, what's his name again? Ah, it's Bjorn something, who wrote a book, ... *The Skeptical Environmentalist*, that was it. That was yonks ago. Well, he keeps popping up with articles, and we gotta deal with them, don't we? Not too long ago, I found some academic wrote a whole book

tearing apart ... Lomborg, that's his name, he's from Denmark ... tearing apart his book, in a super-careful way. Trouble is, Lomborg's all over the media but no one's heard of the other bloke or his book, and I can't even remember his name."

Pav finally interjected. "And ...?"

"Oh yeah, the other guy's book is a critical analysis of Lomborg's book."

"And if you wanted to do a critical analysis like that, you'd need to read Lomborg pretty carefully, yes?"

Roberto paused. "Yeah. But what you're saying is, if I'm not doing a critical analysis, hey I don't need to read everything. Right?"

Seeing Pav nod, Roberto continued. "By the way, does a critical analysis have to be negative? What if I really dig an article?"

"Good point. I'm not sure if there's a common academic term for that, but we do it sometimes."

"I heard that a media story that's very uncritical is called a puff piece. Would that be ... an *uncritical* analysis?"

Pav looked at his watch. He didn't say anything but Roberto knew it signalled that they should get back on topic. He asked, "So, what else should I take away from Bramsen's article?"

"Can you tell me?"

"Well, I was stoked reading the intro when she talked about pillars of support. Last year, I did a workshop where this trainer from overseas took us through a pillars-of-support analysis, on climate of course. Some of the pillars were pretty obvious, like fossil fuel companies and the

government. It was harder to figure out where people's addiction to energy-intensive lifestyles fit in. Still, it was awesome to break down what we're really up against."

"Yes, of course. So you had a head start in reading Bramsen's article. What if someone didn't know about pillars of support? What would they make of it?"

"Not easy! When I read about pillars of support in the intro, I thought, hey, why didn't she include a picture, like the Greek temple she mentions?"

"Why indeed? Here's the thing about academic papers, most of them anyway. They have to be written in acadamese, sorry, in a scholarly style. They are meant to 'advance knowledge', but that means they're written to impress other academics. They aren't for beginners. That means they aren't very good for students."

"That sucks! I guess that's why so many people I know think academics are a bunch of wankers. Sorry, no offence. I sort of thought that too, until Francine ... well, here we are."

Pav took a while to comment. "Back to the article. Can you say what her key idea is?"

Roberto now felt more confident. "Yeah, it's this musical ensemble thing. A regime sort of operates in a coordinated way, and if you can disrupt its ... its way of interacting, then poof, there it goes."

"Very good, Roberto. If you can grasp the key, the central idea in a paper, all the rest is icing. Like what she says about momentum."

"It's that easy? All the stuff about Tunisia and Bahrain, I don't need it?"

"It depends on ..." Pav looked expectantly at Roberto.



“On my purpose. Ah. What you were saying before.”

Roberto was fascinated by how ideas from a study of the Arab spring could be applied to climate campaigning. As they continued to discuss the article, he remembered his task. At the meeting in the café, and afterwards, Francine suggested that he learn about how to read academic papers, so he could tell other activists. Most of them never even imagined studying academic stuff, and would never sit down to examine any article, especially an academic one, unless it was directly relevant to their campaigning. Glancing at the notes he had taken on his phone, he noticed how Pav had helped him see how to take ideas from one area and apply them to another.

Pav was enjoying himself. It was nice to talk to a young person who actually wanted to learn from scholarship without the pressure of formal teaching and marking assignments. He played a careful game of helping Roberto just enough, not being too directive but guiding him when necessary. He looked with approval at Roberto's note-taking. He saw Roberto's heading, “How to read an academic article.” Pav had been reading academic articles for years, for decades actually, but hadn't had much reason to reflect on *how* he did it. It was illuminating to convey his methods to an eager learner, to make explicit what he usually did without thinking.

Roberto asked Pav how he'd chosen Bramsen's article. Pav explained. “I was at a conference in Germany and met Isabel at the conference dinner. She's from Denmark ...” Roberto interrupted, “Hey, just like Lomborg!” Pav continued. “Isabel and I got talking, and afterwards I checked out some of her work, well, I got to

the stage of printing out this article but hadn't yet read it. When Francine contacted me about meeting you, I thought it was a good opportunity to finally read the article. So I appreciate the opportunity."

Their conversation was interrupted when the woman with her dog Muffy reappeared. She had been going in a circle around the park but doubled back to talk with them. "I couldn't help wondering what it is that you're reading, that seems so interesting. Sorry, I can be a busy-body. Oh hello, I'm Susan. You already know Muffy." Muffy came closer, welcoming attention.

Pav looked to Roberto, indicating that he might reply. Roberto again scratched Muffy's head, before responding. "Susan, do you drive a car?"

"Of course. That's how I get Muffy to the park here."

"And you do things like ..." Roberto noticed Pav gesturing towards Bramsen's paper and mouthing 'music'. Roberto picked up the cue and changed course. "What sort of music do you like?"

Susan smiled. "Actually, I like classic rock, you know, like the Rolling Stones. It's satisfying."

Roberto followed up. "Now imagine the Stones are performing, and someone wanted to disrupt it, to cause chaos. How would they go about it?"

Susan played along. "Maybe throw things on the stage. Or unplug the electricity."

"Could you get just one of the Stones not to pay attention, not to pay attention to what the others were playing?"

Susan seemed confused. Pav stepped in, changing the subject. "Susan, could I ask you something different?"

Imagine a pack of wild dogs, on the chase. Or maybe wolves.”

“I wouldn’t want them chasing Muffy here. She’s ... I don’t think she’d stand a chance.”

“Okay, Susan, what would you like to have with you to break up the pack, so they’d be attracted to something else?” Pav subtly licked his lips while looking at the dog. Susan picked up the hint. “Meat. Steaks, huge hunks. Throw them all around.”

Pav smiled. “Wonderful, Susan. It’s just the thing Roberto and I have been discussing. This article, well, it’s not about dogs, but it’s the same idea. When there’s a group of rampaging attackers, how can you get them to stop?”

Susan was now perplexed. What a strange thing these two men were discussing, and why? Wild dogs?

Roberto decided to explain. “This is Professor Brzezicki, from the university here. He’s been helping me understand this article, and we’ve been trying to explain to you what it’s about, but it’s actually about the Arab Spring, have you heard of it?”

Pav followed up. “Roberto’s right. We tried to explain the ideas in the article using ... analogies if you like, different examples. The Rolling Stones, a pack of dogs. I feel we’re confusing you.”

Susan seemed reassured, especially as Roberto continued to pet Muffy.

“Oh, the university. It must be too difficult for the likes of me.”

Pav, seeing Roberto preoccupied with Muffy, jumped in. “Actually no, Susan. Your interest has pushed us to think laterally. In this article, there’s no mention of the Rolling

Stones, or any rock group for that matter, and certainly no mention of packs of dogs.” Pav grinned broadly.

Pav was thinking about Edward de Bono’s old concept of lateral thinking, more commonly expressed these days using the metaphor of thinking outside the box, and how engaging with Susan had led him, and Roberto too, to think of ways to convey Bramsen’s ideas.

As they were silent for a little while, Muffy started barking at a flock of birds that had settled in the trees nearby. The birds flew off, making a terrific noise, and as they did — plop — a few bits of bird poo landed on the copy of Bramsen’s article in Pav’s hands. Pav grinned and said, “Now we know what the birds think of academic writing, it’s a ...” He and Roberto laughed, while Susan stared at them with amazement. As she walked away, she said to Muffy, “I knew professors were eccentric, but they’re so nice and friendly too.”

## 4

# Thinking theory

Sarora needed time to think, away from others. She had just gotten home after a day in the office, and the house was still empty: Ralf wasn't home yet. She made herself a cup of Earl Gray tea and sat in her favourite chair, where she could look out the window at the quiet street. Occasionally someone walked by, and a few cars drove by, but that was all.

After their meeting in the café, Francine had talked with Sarora about the next stage in the project. Here's how Francine had put it: one of the things that activists can learn from academics is frameworks for understanding the world. Francine had talked about theory, about ideological positions, but said it was sometimes easier to think about frameworks. Anyway, Francine asked Sarora to try to learn something about this, and said Sarora could figure out how to do it.

But it wasn't obvious, at least not at first. Sarora thought first about the Refugee Action Group, which they called RAG, and how difficult it was, sometimes, to reach agreement. They could often agree on their actions — a rally, a visiting speaker, practical support — but what really caused friction was the question of responsibility, of driving forces. They argued about the source of refugee problems. Was it war, capitalism, nationalism, or something else, always some other “ism”?

Then Sarora realised the answer was right there before her. The members of RAG each operated from a framework, and where did those frameworks come from? They came from professors, researchers, intellectuals, didn't they? Maybe not always, but sometimes.

Sarora thought about some of her fellow campaigners, and thought about the way they seemed to think about refugee issues. Surely they had been influenced by theories, maybe the ones they studied as undergraduates, if they did. Not all of them had taken sociology or political science or one of those sorts of fields. The ones who hadn't been to university at all, or who'd studied engineering or biology, how had they developed their frameworks?

As Sarora pondered these questions, she noticed some birds and could hear them singing in the distance. This was all so peaceful, so remote from the problems of the world, so different from trying to make sense of big problems like war and prejudice and refugees.

A solution! Why not just ask her fellow campaigners, the core members of RAG, how they had developed their frameworks for understanding the world? They were committed and surely they must be reflective, being aware of their own thinking.

As Sarora imagined a meeting to discuss their frameworks, the theoretical assumptions underlying their worldviews, she thought, "What would *I* say?" This started another line of thought. Sarora tried to remember her own mental journey, how she had learned about refugee issues and ways of explaining refugee problems. And it wasn't obvious. Her background growing up in a refugee family was crucial, it must be crucial, but how did it enter her

thinking? When did she start learning about wars, genocide, oppression and other things that pushed people to leave their homes, seeking safety? Did my parents talk about this? I don't think so. They were just struggling to make a better life, for her and her brother, and didn't talk about capitalism and militarism and all that. Did I read articles? Did I talk to some people? It wasn't at university; my courses on business and finance were not about world problems.

She thought, if I can't figure out how I developed my ideas, how can I expect others to do it for themselves? This whole approach seemed misguided. Sarora began day-dreaming, listening for sounds. She closed her eyes and imagined her most recent conversation with Francine. What was it that Francine wanted? It was something important. It was about what we don't know, for our campaigning, and what will help us find answers. Theories can help us understand things, so what is it about theories? We all have ways of understanding the world, even if we don't have a good grip on how we came to those ways of understanding.

Sarora felt she was going in circles. She then imagined a meeting of RAG, the Refugee Action Group, and one of their arguments. It was over something trivial, like the wording on their leaflet or who was going to take responsibility for media liaison. But it seemed like every time they had one of these silly arguments, each person's framework, their way of understanding the world, was somehow present, shaping what they said.

This wasn't going anywhere. It felt like she'd been sitting here for an hour, so she looked up at the clock on the table. Only a few minutes! She heard the faint sound of a car going by. Strangely, it was calming to hear ordinary

sounds, to see her familiar room, to be sitting in a favourite chair. Everything was so ordinary, so different from the terrible and challenging refugee issues.

Then she thought about their meeting in the café, and planning what each of them would do. Roberto was going to meet a professor to get ideas about reading an academic article. Betty was going to meet someone else to find out how to get copies of academic articles. What was Francine going to do? She couldn't remember. But the common theme was ... what? ... it was seeing what they could learn from academic work. So, what about frameworks?

An idea. She didn't know for sure where her framework had come from, but she did know how much she studied academic theories — not much at all! But maybe the others in RAG had. That was a possible way forward, but what next? Just then, she heard a key in the front door. Ralf must be home. The time for focused thinking was over, for now.

The final clue came to Sarora two days later, when she was in the shower. Just like she thought before, she could ask others what they were doing now to learn about theory. That was straightforward. The trick was that being asked would lead them to think about how they had learned about theory in the past. Sarora thought, the best part of this idea is that I can be honest and say that I don't spend any time trying to learn theory. That can let the others shine, at least if they don't look down on learning. I'll have to avoid using the word "studying."

The next step was deciding who to approach. Inspired by the dinner meeting organised by Francine, Sarora invited two RAG members. Elle was a social worker with strong



feminist views. Markus worked in the government transportation department, as a planner — and he seemed remarkably knowledgeable about Marxism. And Roberto. He's not in RAG but he's involved in Francine's project and would be sure to be interested. The hard part was getting them together at the same time.

It turned out not to be so difficult. Sarora invited them to her house, in the evening after dinnertime, and with the promise of a few Indian snacks. She guessed that they were intrigued to see her home and intrigued about the topic. Ralf was happy to watch videos in another part of the house. He was supportive, and was pleased to greet the guests and then say he had something else to do. So helpful!

Miraculously, they all arrived, right on time. It had been a warm day, so they left the front and back doors open for a cooling breeze, and they could hear the birds. There were nearly always birds singing at this time of year.

As they sat around the room, with snacks available, Sarora initiated the formal part of the discussion, explaining what it was all about. She had decided to be open about the difficulties, as she saw them.

"Thank you for coming. Elle and Markus, as I told you, Roberto and I are helping in a project to figure out what activists can learn from academics. Francine — you all know her — asked me to explore what we learn from intellectual work to help us make sense of the world."

Roberto quietly added, "Hey, that's a great summary."

Sarora smiled his way and continued. "This was a large challenge for me because I never studied politics, only accountancy and finance. I tried to think how I learned about refugee issues, and I think it was from talking with

refugee families and reading online articles by refugee activists.” She paused to see how the others were reacting. “I hope that you can tell us about your own learning, as I think it will be more ... informative, maybe revealing.”

Sarora said all this in a modest tone of voice. It was a powerful way to encourage others to open up. She turned to Markus. “Markus, you always seem so confident in your thinking. Can you tell us what you’ve learned from professors? Do you read their books and articles?”

Markus took the floor. He seemed to have prepared a short speech for his small audience. “Sarora and Elle, I’m sure you’re familiar with my approach, and that I draw on Marxist ideas. I can say this to you, because you’re friends, fellow campaigners. When I’m at work, I keep most of these ideas to myself.”

Markus looked towards Roberto when he said this. He trusted Roberto because Sarora had vouched for him.

“Among the general public, I need to be careful because so many people conflate Marxism and Communism ...”

Roberto used his hand to catch Markus’ attention. “*Conflake* — what’s that?”

Markus slowed down. “*Conflate*. It’s treating two things as the same when they should be separate. People think Marxism and Communist regimes are the same thing. They don’t understand that Marxism is a critique of capitalism. The crimes of governments in the name of communism, you know Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, they’re a long way from what Marx said and did.”

Markus used gestures when speaking, and these became pronounced when he spoke of crime. He also grimaced. Now his expression changed to one of amusement.

“When I was in high school, some random student, thinking he was funny, called me ‘Markus the Marxist’. I laughed it off, pretending I knew what it was all about, and then went to look up ‘Marxist’. It was all very strange to me, but I got interested, and I started noticing things related to Marxism.”

He looked towards Sarora. “I appreciate you acknowledging that you can’t remember, all that well, how you learned about refugee issues. I can relate to that when it comes to Marx. It developed gradually to become like a background lens. Whenever I encountered a social or economic issue, I’d think about how Marx might have analysed it, and sometimes look online for relevant material to better understand it.

“It didn’t take long to discover the limits of a classical Marxist line, or variations like the Trotskyists, like some of the groups you see selling their left-wing newspapers at rallies. That led me to explore critiques of Marx and Marxism.”

Markus started numbering them on his fingers. “Most obvious are the anti-communists, the capitalist ideologues who use Marx as a whipping boy, to drum up fear.”

When Markus paused to catch his breath — he was pointing to another finger — Sarora softly intervened. “Can you tell us about what you learned from academic work?”

Markus recalibrated. “Sorry, I was getting carried away. The thing is, anti-communist rhetoric is everywhere: it’s in the media, right-wing politicians constantly amplify

it. Because we're saturated with those ideas, I never felt the need to check out anti-communist scholarship. There's bound to be plenty of it, but I just couldn't be bothered. What's more interesting are left-wing perspectives. The anarchists criticised Marx, and some of their critiques make sense, like warning about rule by representatives of the workers, the so-called dictatorship of the proletariat, though how much of this can be sheeted home to Marx is questionable."

As Markus paused, Sarora again asked, "Academic work?"

"Can I sidetrack a bit? We ought to problematise *academic* and *activist*."

Roberto interrupted. "What'd you mean, *problematise*?"

Markus explained. "Well, we're treating these two categories, academic and activist, as if they are something natural, distinct from each other. That could be a problem. They replicate the categories of theory and practice, and theory is valued more, certainly by scholars. It might be better to talk about intellectuals and workers, or maybe mental and manual labour, or ideas and action. They don't have to be dichotomous ... you know, distinct. And it's not just a matter of activists learning from academics. It's also the other way around."

Roberto mimed applauding and murmured, "Wow, that's deep."

Markus saw Sarora looking at him hopefully. "Okay, for our purposes we can keep talking about academics and activists. And speaking of academics, there's one whose work I liked, a sociologist, Alvin Gouldner. It took a while

to get through his books, especially one of them, that put Marxism in perspective, critically, without dismissing it.

“Classical Marxism didn’t deal with issues like feminism and environmentalism, not in a fundamental way. It means that class struggle, Marx’s analysis of capital, all that, it’s still useful, but it has to be broadened to take into account other forms of exploitation, alienation, ...”

Markus at this point had his hands stretched out as he tried to portray the breadth of the issues. He looked around the room and picked up his cup. “Take this. It was probably manufactured in China, but the specific place doesn’t even matter. The crucial thing is that it was manufactured, and hence it embodies class relations. The workers who made it, well, they did the soul-destroying work in the factory and the owners reaped the profits, the surplus value from the workers’ labour. But there are also environmental impacts, and patriarchy comes in too. They interconnect with class relations. You’d have to know more details.”

He turned to Sarora. “There might be some academic writing about this practical stuff, but how would I know?”

Sarora had taken an informal facilitation role, and said, “Thank you, Markus. I’m impressed by the way you’ve explained your thinking. I can now see better where you’re coming from when we discuss refugee support.”

At this point, they started discussing refugees and what a Marxist perspective could contribute to their campaigning. After a while, Roberto asked about climate change and Marxism. What was surprising was that Elle and Roberto were more enthusiastic about seeing the relevance of Marxism, perhaps with the eagerness of new learners,

whereas Markus kept bringing up limitations, sort of as the voice of experience.

Sarora wasn't saying much. Finally, during a pause in the conversation, she said, "I'm trying to take some notes, but I'm finding it difficult. I need to keep reminding myself of the question: what can we learn from academics to help develop useful frameworks to guide our thinking — and our campaigning?" As she said this, Sarora realised she had summarised their task better than before. It was becoming clearer in her mind.

They all looked at Markus, who accepted the challenge. "That's a difficult question. I guess there must be a lot to learn from academic work, but ... for me, the key is ideas to help me make sense of things, and these ideas don't develop in the abstract. They have to be tested and refined — like in our discussion here."

He put down his hands and looked around. "That didn't really answer your question, did it?"

They continued to look at Markus, so he continued. "Marx said people's ideas are shaped by dominant institutions. Does that make sense? Our social location shapes our thinking, so what we consider common sense reflects prevailing structures of power. But we're not bound by this: we have the capacity to resist dominant ideologies. It's sort of like a class struggle in the realm of ideas, where competing worldviews are contested."

Roberto chipped in. "That's wild, man. I can kinda see it in arguments about climate change, especially with the sceptics and the fossil fuel industry."

Markus was appreciative. "Yes. And it's usually far easier to see this in our opponents. What if our own ideas

are influenced in the same sort of way? We live in a capitalist society, so it's almost inevitable that our ideas are deformed, sorry influenced, by capitalist social relations."

Elle finished his thought: "Except when they're not. So why not?"

Markus was in his element. "Class struggle. Well, not just class struggle, struggle more generally. Ideas are forged and refined by their use. Marx's ideas were limited by his social location and the social formations of his time. That's what Gouldner was on about. I remembered the title of his book: *Against Fragmentation*. Not a best seller!"

Elle probed. "So you're saying that all sets of ideas — including Marxism — are influenced, even deformed, by the social location of those who have them. Right?" Elle had a puzzled expression.

Roberto jumped in. "That's unreal. Do you think that applies to climate campaigning? You know, like we do some sorts of actions 'cause so many of us are middle class? And we can't even see it 'cause we're like fish that can't see the water. What a downer!"

Sarora had been listening, fascinated. "Markus, please, can you tell us this? This fellow Gouldner, he was an academic, yes? Do you know how many other academic Marxists have used his ideas, applied them to their thinking?"

They all looked to Markus, who took a little while to reply. "Yes, Gouldner was an academic, a sociologist. But I'm not sure how much influence he had."

Roberto said, "How 'bout checking out his citations?" He looked almost longingly towards his phone at the side of the room.

Markus was impressed. “Good idea. But a citation doesn’t necessarily mean someone, the citer, has taken the ideas on board. You’d need to read their articles yourself to know for sure. Big job!”

Elle pressed: “But what’s your assessment? Based on what you’ve read.”

Markus puckered his lips. “I’d say Gouldner was an outlier. He got a lot of attention for his work on the ‘New Class’, but his stuff on Marxism ... well, I’d say it’s mostly ignored.”

Elle had a thought. “Is that like, his ideas were subject to the same ... the same influences he wrote about?”

Markus: “Maybe. That’s getting pretty specific. I think you’d need to be a Gouldner scholar to give a good answer, you know, the same way Gouldner was a scholar of Marx.”

Sarora had been taking notes, but hadn’t written anything for a while. She asked, “Markus, could you summarise what you think ...?”

Markus raised his hand. “Okay, I know what you’re going to say.” He waited to see Sarora’s reaction — she smiled, a go-ahead — and continued. “What can we, as refugee allies, learn from academic work? Right? Well ... it’s pretty hard to say, but there’s useful stuff there, but it needs to be tested against practice. And that’s the problem. I don’t read much academic work because it’s like them writing for each other, or just to impress each other. But even then, sometimes it’s useful. That’s not much of an answer, is it? Can we hear from you, Elle?”

Elle realised she needed to focus. Ever since they had started this meeting, her mind had been racing furiously, stimulated by everyone’s comments. To start with, she



wasn't quite sure where her feminist ideas had come from. And now there was this idea that frameworks of ideas were themselves somehow influenced by the context.

When the Refugee Action Group had discussions, Elle found it straightforward to contribute. Women were often afterthoughts, and there was the role of men in war and oppression that drove the refugee crisis. And then there was the role of men running the governments — it was mostly men — who were in charge of refugee policy.

Elle reflected that she didn't need all the answers, and that she didn't need to be an authority. Anyway, why was she treated as being responsible for bringing up women's perspectives, even if the others always welcomed what she had to say?

Markus had just said, "Can we hear from you, Elle?" It was time to focus. And she did.

"Thanks, Markus. My head's been buzzing with everything you all've been saying. I really want to hone in on Sarora's challenge, and it's a real challenge, because for the life of me I can't recall or pin down how my ideas about feminism actually formed. More to the point, I can't figure out the role of academic work."

Sarora could tell that Elle was a little flustered, and said, "Just tell us what you're thinking. It'll be fine."

Elle relaxed. "When I was growing up, feminism wasn't really on my radar, and politics was just that stuff you'd see in the media. I wasn't studying any of that — just the usual school stuff — and somehow that didn't seem real, and didn't have anything to do with me. Funny enough, it was personal stuff that got me interested. You know, some guys are absolute jerks, nothing surprising

there, but I started noticing how they got away with more, and landed jobs more easily. That's when I started paying attention.

"There was a group of us girls and I started hearing, from one of them especially, about bigger issues, about oppression in other countries, about how women were held back and abused. That got me noticing things around me. But honestly, I wasn't thinking too deeply about it yet.

"Then at uni, a friend got me along to a student group, and I ended up getting involved with some people who were way more clued up than I was. They'd throw around names like Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer — you know, like feminist classic figures, and a bunch of others. I even tried reading a few things. But I mainly developed my thinking through all the conversations we had, arguing about particular issues. That's when I learned about all the different types of feminism, you know like liberal feminism and socialist feminism and radical feminism. Don't get me started! The main thing is, feminism became my framework in relation to activism."

Elle had been staring into the distance while speaking, and now looked at each of the others. They were all listening carefully, not daring to interrupt. She tried to focus.

"I think I'm rambling a bit. To keep it simple, I'm a lot like Sarora. I'm not sure what we're meant to take from academic work. Actually, now that I think about it, there was this one time someone mentioned an article in a feminist journal, called *Signs* I think, so I had a flick through it and a few other articles in the same journal. That's when I realised there's this massive amount of

feminist writing out there. It was all so heavy I didn't get very far. It's like Markus said, it felt like academics just writing for each other, and that was such a letdown, especially coming from feminists. But who knows, maybe some of it trickles down and reaches the rest of us."

As Elle paused, the others were hesitant to say anything, until Roberto asked, "Those feminist classics, you know like Germaine Greer, I've heard of her, well, were they academics?"

Elle responded tentatively. "I don't think so."

Sarora asked, "Do you think there's anything we can learn from feminist academics, for RAG?"

Elle responded immediately. "Maybe if they write books, ones I could understand. Are academic feminist journals a lost cause? Someone else'll have to figure it out. It's way too much for me."

Sarora looked at Roberto. "Who could help us?"

Roberto knew how to respond; he knew Sarora was referring to Francine's project. "I think it depends. I think our best shot is to ask around to find a sympathetic professor, or maybe a PhD student, who can help us, who can guide us to what might be useful. And maybe even help us understand the ideas."

Elle asked, "Do you think so? We never had any of them in RAG. Well, actually, one or two, I don't think they had full-time positions, and anyway they weren't into feminist theory."

Sarora said, "Francine somehow made contact with academics who were willing to help."

Roberto followed up. "Yeah, I met this prof, his name is Pavel Brzezicki, and he was really helpful. It was amaz-

ing. Elle, if you could find the right person, you might be able to understand some of what's in those feminist articles, you know in the academic journals."

Elle said, "Sounds good. But why should I bother, when I can get ideas by talking to others and reading blogs? Anything good is bound to filter out of the uni, isn't it?" She looked at the others and repeated, "Isn't it?"

Markus responded. "Good stuff probably will filter out, as you say, but how would we know? After I came across Gouldner's work, I wondered why the key ideas weren't better known. There they are, openly, in a book by a major left scholar, so why haven't bloggers taken them up?"

Roberto tentatively said, "Can you really be so sure they're important? This isn't questioning you, Markus, it's just a general point."

Markus smiled appreciatively. "And it's a good point. I guess I just figure that if I found some ideas that seem relevant and seem to have been forgotten or just never taken up, there might be others. Like you say, how can we be sure they're important? Well, we can't. And maybe we shouldn't rely, too much, on intellectuals to inform us about what we need to know. In a sense, this takes me back to how dominant ideologies maintain their hegemony."

Markus, noticing blank looks from Roberto and Sarora, quickly appended, "That is, how they maintain their dominance."

Elle took up his point. "I can see this when it comes to feminism. Patriarchy is the dominant ideology, and it just keeps being reinforced throughout society. But plenty of women push back against it in really practical ways."

She had been looking at Sarora but, noticing Markus and Roberto, added, “Lots of men too. Anyway, the question is, there might be some great ideas hidden away in feminist journals, and maybe elsewhere too, and how are we to know?”

Elle paused. “I think I just restated your point, Markus.”

Sarora attempted to summarise. “It seems that you agree that there might be academic work valuable for RAG, and climate campaigners, and others, but the question is how to know. This is just like our project with Francine.”

Roberto chimed in. “Just like it. Right on!”

Sarora continued. “Is there something you’d like to add, Roberto? We’ve been thinking about RAG. How much applies to climate campaigning?”

Roberto asked, “Can I tell you about pillars of support?” He proceeded to explain how pillars-of-support analysis was so useful to activists. By pointing to the roles of government, business, media and other “pillars” supporting oppressive systems of power, it was easier to plan effective campaigns. He said few academics paid any attention to pillars analysis, but then Pav introduced him to Isabel’s article.

While Roberto was speaking, Sarora began thinking about her own way of understanding the world. Markus and Elle seemed so confident in how they saw things, drawing on Marxism and feminism in flexible and self-critical ways. That was attractive. It seemed ... what exactly? Anyway, Sarora thought, what is my framework? Is it some sort of liberal humanism? Am I caught in something orthodox? Is that so bad? Maybe this was the reason she couldn’t see

how she had developed her ideas, if they had just been what was conventional. But if her ideas were conventional, then why was she active with RAG, when most others with similar ideas weren't active the same way?

Suddenly Sarora was jolted out of her reverie. "Sarora, what do you think?" It was Roberto asking. Perhaps he had noticed she wasn't paying attention, because he helpfully followed up with an explanation. "I think you and I are alike in not having a well-developed ... or rather a coherent ... way of thinking about the world. Or maybe just not one that can be classified so easily. What do you think?"

Sarora was thankful to Roberto for rescuing her. "I was just thinking the same thing."

Roberto followed up, asking Markus and Elle, "Does that mean we're not ideological? What's it mean?"

Markus had a ready reply. "Ideology is just another word for a framework for understanding the social world. For critics, ideology is something bad, but actually everyone has a framework, so everyone is ideological, in a sense. It's just that the dominant ideology is invisible to most people."

Elle jumped in. "Just to be clear — an ideology isn't necessarily good or bad. Right, Markus? It's more like a tool for making sense of the social world. Feminist ideas are super useful for some things, and that's why I'm all for pushing feminist perspectives. They're so often buried or overlooked. But I guess for other purposes, a different hat might work better."

Roberto was appreciative. "Wow, thanks Markus, thanks Elle. You've really cleared things up. And when you

make these comments about ideology, about perspectives ... what perspective are you using when you make them?"

Markus answered. "I guess you might call it a *meta*-narrative. We step back from our usual framework so we can think about frameworks generally. It's like thinking about thinking. You could call that *meta*-thinking."

Roberto was pleased. "Hey, great. Is that what Facebook did, step back to become Meta?"

Markus and Elle laughed. Markus said, "It's so annoying when companies take over good words. There are so many products called 'Revolution' I've lost count. I'm waiting for one called 'Counter-revolution'!"

They were all having a good time, but Sarora was struggling with her note-taking. "I don't want to be a party-pooper, but can you help me? Is there some way of summarising all this, especially the part about what we can learn from academic work?"

Elle said, "What do you think, Sarora?"

Sarora was put on the spot, but felt she was in a supportive environment. "It seems to me that it's very hard to figure out whether we have much to learn from academics, so far as frameworks are concerned. It's all so diffuse. But Markus, you gave me an idea, about meta-narratives. In university classes, in some of them, isn't the point to introduce students to different perspectives? Is that training in taking ... a meta perspective?"

Elle said, "Write that down, Sarora. You nailed it."

Roberto then said, "Sounds good. But do you have to go to uni for this? I feel like I've learned more ... more meta stuff in action groups. Like right now."

Markus gave Roberto a thumbs-up. He was copying Roberto, playfully yet sincerely.



## 5

# Getting access

Betty was again looking for a meeting place, but this time it was an office on the campus of the local university. Getting to the campus by bus wasn't too hard, but there were so many buildings, numbered confusingly. Some helpful young students pointed her in the right direction and now she was at the end of a long corridor, looking at the office numbers and the names on the doors. No one seemed to be around but there was one door ajar. Ah, this must be it. Five names were on the door, including the one she had arranged to meet, Professor Winifred Maxwell.

As she gently knocked on the door, the professor jumped up and opened the door all the way, exclaiming "You must be Betty. Please come in."

Professor Maxwell was short, well-dressed and seemed sprightly. She had let her hair go white, which made her seem appropriately senior. Betty looked around and saw a smallish room packed with desks and bookshelves, and all the bookshelves were solid with books, all the way to the ceiling. There were some filing cabinets too, with hardly an inch of clear space. The window looked out on a carpark, with other buildings nearby.

Professor Maxwell must have read her mind. "This is where they put us out to pasture, after a lifetime of scholarship. If we're not securing grant money, they tuck us away with a desk in this obscure corner, well out of everyone's

way. I suppose I shouldn't complain though. Most of my contemporaries ..." — she gestured at the empty chairs in the room — "are fortunate if they can even get out of bed these days, and I rarely see them. That's fine. I usually have this office all to myself."

Betty hadn't known what to expect. Indicating a chair for Betty to sit in, Professor Maxwell just kept talking. "Francine mentioned you wanted to learn how to access academic articles, but she didn't go into much detail. That's fine — Francine and I go way back, well not quite as far back as me, if you catch my drift!" She smiled at her own humour. "I had been expecting someone younger ... it's lovely to meet someone with life experience. So many of the youngsters these days don't really have a clue what they're on about." She chuckled. "Anyway, nearly all the students I see are after advice about degrees and majors, not actually about learning anything, much less accessing library resources. But of course that's automatic if you're enrolled, so that's the first thing I'd suggest, enrolling, because students get full access to all the databases."

Betty had been listening carefully, trying to extract any useful information from this unending stream of words. She remembered what Francine had told her. "Winnie is a non-stop talker but don't hesitate about interrupting, she won't mind. She has a heart of gold and will do everything to help. Take notes!"

Betty mustered her courage and interrupted, "Professor Maxwell ..."

"Call me Winnie. Everyone does."

"... Winnie, at my stage of life I'm not sure I'm up to doing a degree."

“Nonsense, of course you could. But that’s not the point. All you need to do is enrol in something, anything, and then you have full access ...”

“But the cost? And I don’t like to enrol unless ...”

Winnie seemed to know what Betty was about to say. “You’re right. Some people are put off by fees and don’t want to enrol under false pretences.” She paused to look at Betty, and it was the first moment of silence in the room.

“You really want to find out how to access university resources, don’t you?” Betty nodded. “How wonderful. And it’s not just for you, but for others like you, isn’t it?” Betty nodded again. Winnie seemed to remember what Francine had said, and became more focused.

“Let’s begin with what you’re up against. I’ve got my computer on — can you see the screen properly? What would you like to explore, just to get us going? How about activism and social media? That topic interests me too.”

Winnie opened her browser and went to Google Scholar, and typed in “activism on social media.” She was a skilled typist but purposely went very slowly so Betty could keep up with each step.

“See these results? Each one is a reference to an academic article, occasionally to a book or report or newspaper article or something else.”

Betty decided to be more vocal. “Every result’s about activism on social media, is it? That seems like a lot to get through.”

Winnie was pleased. “You’re quite right. This is just the beginning — there will be hundreds of results. You’re probably wondering which ones are actually worth reading. Google Scholar arranges the results in a rather mysterious

way, but typically it puts sources near the top that have been highly cited. Those are the ones that many other scholars have found worth citing.”

Betty remembered what Roberto had said about citations, so this sort of made sense.

“Let’s continue, and choose this article here.” Winnie was pointing at the screen, and was about to click on a link. “See, it’s titled ‘Youth collective activism through social media: the role of collective efficacy’. Sounds exciting!”

Betty could see that Winnie was being sarcastic, at least a bit, and anyway was enjoying herself while being helpful. Winnie clicked on the link.

“Now, look here, this article was published in *New Media & Society*, which is, incidentally, a high-prestige and high-impact academic journal. When I click on the link, it takes me to the abstract — that’s a one-paragraph summary — and the references. See here? If you want to read the whole article, you’ll need to click on ‘Get access’. Let’s see how much it’s going to cost you.”

Winnie turned to look at Betty. “You know, there’s an easy way to get access. Just find a student or a staff member to let you use their password.” She winked. “Don’t tell anyone I told you. It’s a no-no.” Winnie smiled, to herself it seemed, as her eyes stared in the distance, like she was remembering something. “It’s a no-no for a good reason. Giving your password to someone else can get you in trouble.” Betty guessed that Winnie had done just that.

“Anyway, add it to your list of options. Now, back to ‘Get access’. See here, according to the publisher’s information, access to this article can be purchased — for

£29. What's that in US dollars? \$37. Or €34. And the price will probably go up. In a decade, in 2034, ..."

Winnie noticed that Betty seemed shocked, and shared her emotion. "It's costly for a few pages of text, isn't it? Outrageous, really. Especially if you're not sure it's worth reading. Maybe it's not what you're after and you need to check dozens of articles, hundreds even. Expensive!"

Betty stuttered, "Maybe it's okay, if it pays the authors for their work."

This set Winnie off on a little lecture, more like a tirade. "If you had the money to purchase articles like this, just know that the price you pay doesn't go to the authors. They're not compensated *at all*. Neither are the scholarly reviewers, the ones who read the article when it was submitted and wrote reports on whether it should be published and how it could be improved. Neither, in many cases, is the editor of the journal, who might only receive some teaching relief or modest payment, but nothing extra when you pay to access this article. Your money goes to a big company like Sage, and to its shareholders."

Betty tried to take in this barrage of information, and had another thought. "For this price, do they post you a copy, with a cover? You know, something nice to put on your shelf?"

"Goodness, no. It's only an electronic copy, and if you wanted to print it out, that's up to you." Looking at Betty with sympathy, "Yes, £29 for a bunch of electrons. What has the world come to?"

Betty wrote on her pad. Seeing this, Winnie continued. "All right, buying a copy is one option, but put it at the bottom of your list. Why subsidise these vulture publishers?"

Let's think about other options. Here's what I would do next. Look, I've copied the title of the article, like so, and pasted it into my web browser. The idea is to see if the article is available online somewhere else, somewhere where it's free. Free is what we're after."

Betty murmured, "Free sounds good."

"Free is the way to go. Sometimes when I'm searching for an article, the first thing I try is a Google search. Except I switched to Duckduckgo, for privacy reasons, when I'm searching for something on a *sensitive* topic, you know what I mean?" Winnie winked, but Betty didn't really know, and her face matched her puzzled feeling, and Winnie quickly continued. "Oh, I didn't mean porn, I mean something controversial, like euthanasia or genocide or *right-wing*."

Betty knew about controversial topics in the media but not why academics might be worried about looking them up on the web. She realised Winnie was getting off topic, but also wondered whether ignorance was controversial. As she turned these ideas over in her head, suddenly she heard Winnie. "What is it, Betty? Are you okay? Ah, yes, 'free', free access. Where was I? I try a web search, and there are several places worth trying, which may or may not come up. They are — let me remember, ah yes — Academia.edu, ResearchGate.net, and university repositories." Seeing Betty's blank expression, Winnie explained. "Academics can put their articles online so you don't need to pay to download them, and ... let's look at Academia."

Winnie patiently showed how to go to Academia.edu and search for an article via the author's name or the title of

the article. Betty was amazed. Millions of articles. Betty wrote down the options for free access, and waited.

“Look, this article from *New Media & Society* is available on ResearchGate. Hurrah! No need to spend £29.” Winnie turned towards Betty with her fist raised, and then continued. “Let’s not stop now. Let’s check out other ways to obtain the article.” Winnie was scrolling through links tossed up by her search using Duckduckgo, but wasn’t finding much more. Still, she turned with a smile.

“This isn’t the end of it, Betty. Here’s one possibility that even most academics aren’t aware of, because they’re too spoiled by their library access. It’s called Sci-hub. Originally hosted in Sweden, it provides full text of a vast number of articles. However, publishers loathed it and sued for copyright infringement or some other legal reason. I forget the specifics. Anyway, it’s worth checking. It’s especially good for scientific papers.” Betty saw Sci-hub on the screen and wrote it down.

Winnie swivelled in her chair and faced Betty. “You have a pretty good list, now, don’t you?” Betty nodded, thinking this signalled the end of their meeting, but she was wrong. “Can you think of another way to obtain a free copy of an article?” Betty struggled to think, and thought it might be a trick question. Then she had an idea. “I could break into a computer, you know, one of those databases you were talking about. Well, not me, but someone else might be able to.”

Winnie was impressed. “Very good, Betty, you’re a woman of enterprise! But what I had in mind is something far simpler, and completely legal. It’s writing to the author.”

Betty felt foolish. It was too obvious. She started to respond, “But ...”

Winnie pressed on. “Not everyone is willing to help, but many do. It’s not very common these days, what with academics having access to databases and there’s so much online. However, back in the old days ...” She gestured expansively. “In the old days, when I was much younger — can you believe it? Before the Internet! Yes, I’m that old — we regularly wrote to authors to request copies of articles. They were called *reprints*. The university even printed postcards for making these requests. All you had to do was fill in the author’s name and address, the title of the article you wanted and your name and address. In those days, as you’ll remember, we actually sent letters.”

Winnie paused and looked questioningly at Betty. “You do have email, don’t you?”

Betty was embarrassed. “Well, yes, sort of. I don’t look at it very often.”

Winnie was immediately sympathetic. “If you don’t look at email very often ... you’re lucky. It’s a curse. But it is useful for contacting authors.” She stopped, the first break in the continuous flow of words, and Betty felt better, and checked her notes.

Winnie, after staring at the screen for a while, finally turned to Betty and spoke. “Can you imagine being an academic and spending years studying something and eventually you write some articles and they’re published. What do you think happens next?”

Betty could tell that Winnie was teaching her, and did her best. “Pride. I’d be proud.”



“Yes, it’s an accomplishment. And who do you think’s going to notice?”

“Other professors? The ones you showed me, the ones who make citations.”

“Yes, indeed. Let me tell you something. After I publish an article, the usual result is total silence, and that goes for everyone else I’ve talked to, though we don’t often mention it. One of my junior colleagues once said to me, ‘If anybody ever wrote and asked me for a copy of one of my articles, I’d cry for joy’.”

“You mean they won’t be offended if I ask for a — what do you call it? — a reprint?”

“Probably not. They’re more likely to be pleased. There’s an old statistic, though I’m not sure if it’s apocryphal — you know, doubtful — that the average scientific paper is read by just four ... or was it seven? ... people, and two of them were the reviewers for the journal. Anyway, academic publications function like a currency in a game of getting ahead. You count them rather than actually read them.”

Winnie looked pleased with her analogy, and then had another thought. “So, you might ask, why would you want to read them, if no one else does?” She proceeded to answer her own question. “Most articles, the ones in decent journals, are high quality. They might be wrong, mind you, but they’re based on years of work. The authors know what they’re talking about. There’s plenty of shonk and irrelevance, but, you never know, there might be something useful.”

Betty thought Winnie was enjoying their meeting, with an opportunity to share her wisdom and experience

with an eager listener, and so wasn't surprised when Winnie asked to see her list. After pondering it briefly, Winnie continued. "Very good. One more thing. If you're going to write to an author requesting a copy of their article, what would you say?"

Betty was put on the spot. She decided it wasn't a trick question, and came up with "How about, 'Could you please send me a copy of your article?'" Winnie was encouraging. "That's admirably direct. Will it get you what you want? Look, how about we go about composing a letter right here, so we can play with options?"

Betty murmured agreement, and Winnie opened an email on the screen. "The first thing is, who are we going to send it to? Let's suppose you're writing to the author of that article we found in *New Media & Society*. It's Alcides Velásquez. We need to find his email address. We have his article, and it's probably listed there, but that's cheating, we need to assume we just have his name and institutional affiliation, namely where he works, almost certainly a university."

"Duckduckgo?"

"Right. We can search for just his name if it's not too common. Sometimes, though, it's a common name like Mary Smith, or there's some football player with the same name. A lot more people search for football players than academics. To get around that, just add the name of his university in the search."

Winnie had soon found the author's email address and pasted it into the email. "Now, what should go in the subject line?"

Betty was getting into the swing of things. "How about 'Request for reprint'? Or 'Can you help me?'"

Winnie was gentle in commenting. "Unfortunately, 'Can you help me?' is risky, because there are so many scam emails, you wouldn't believe. Here's what we can do. We put the title of the article we want in the subject line. It will resonate with the author. They still might worry that it could be a scam but they'll probably open the email just in case."

Betty, tentatively, "You mean *New Media & Society*? Is that the title you mean?"

Winnie quickly corrected. "Sorry. I've been talking so much about the title of the *journal*, and we haven't even ..."

Winnie's helpful attitude made Betty feel more confident, and for the first time she interrupted. "I've been keeping a journal. Francine suggested it."

Winnie's eyebrows went up. "Ah, I'm sorry, I've been using academic-speak rather than plain English. Here in the uni library, a *journal* is ... a magazine is the closest thing. They're also called periodicals or serials." Winnie voice changed. "Did you know, when the librarian here cancelled a group of subscriptions to journals, we called her the serial killer." Winnie chuckled at her own joke. Betty smiled in sympathy, just about catching the humour and appreciating feeling so relaxed with Winnie.

"Now, Betty, how do you suggest we start the email, requesting 'Youth collective activism through social media: the role of collective efficacy'? What a mouthful. Did I ever write titles like that?" Winnie was talking to herself, but then waited for Betty's response.

Betty struggled, but then remembered writing letters to potential employers, when she was young. “How about this? ‘My name is Betty Young. Could you please send me a copy of your article ...?’”

“Good start. Betty, is your proper name Elizabeth? That would sound more ... less informal.”

“Yes, I’m an Elizabeth. But I’ve been Betty forever.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can use Elizabeth, anything that makes you seem more serious. Now what about the next bit? I’m not sure, but it might be better to add some gravitas, something that sounds impressive, before the request. How about this? ‘I’m doing research on activism and saw your article ...’”

“But I’m not really doing research, am I? I wouldn’t want to ...”

“Ah, here’s a solution. You can say, ‘I’m interested in activism’. When academics write that they’re interested in a topic, it really means they’re doing research on it. But when *you* say you’re interested in a topic, it just means you’re interested. What’s a little ambiguity between friends?”

Betty was bemused. All this fuss over how to write an email. She asked, “This email ... does it really ... how much difference?” She couldn’t complete her thought, but Winnie picked up on her worries.

“I’m guessing you’re wondering why it makes all that much difference, why we need to phrase this letter so carefully.” Betty nodded, and Winnie continued. “You’d be surprised how many academics are sensitive to *status*.” Winnie grinned. “When a big name — big name in their research field — comes a-calling, they will fall about

swooning, or they'll be green with envy, it depends, but if it's a high school student asking for help with a project, they'll just press *delete*." Winnie poised her finger over the computer's delete key for dramatic emphasis. "You want to avoid that *delete*."

Betty could tell that Winnie was falling back into her nonstop talking mode, and jumped in. "I see what you mean. I wouldn't like to be in the delete category."

"Quite right." Winnie snapped back to business. "What's next?"

"Just the request?"

"There's one other thing. Making a request like this is unusual, so it helps to provide some justification, to make yourself seem important enough. How about this? 'I'm an independent scholar investigating activism and social media.'"

"What does that mean ... independent?"

"When you write to an academic about research matters, they will assume you're an academic too, and normally you put your university address in the email signature. 'Independent scholar' means you're doing research but not employed, at least not in a university or somewhere with access to databases. That's the whole point. You want to come across as someone serious who nevertheless doesn't want to spend ..."

"Serious but not flush with cash?"

"Exactly right, Betty." Winnie paused, thinking of something. "Are you comfortable with presenting yourself as an independent scholar?"

"Not really. But this isn't just for me." Betty pointed at her notepad.

“Sorry, I forgot. Your list. Very good.”

They continued to discuss how to construct an email. Betty imagined Roberto doing this, which helped her feel more relaxed about the process.

Just as they were finishing, a woman appeared at the door to Winnie’s office, which she had left partly open. The woman was tall and angular, like an athlete, with long brown hair and glasses with thick dark frames. She was dressed entirely in white, crisply pressed, giving her a striking appearance. She said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had a visitor” and was about to leave when Winnie promptly responded, “Come in, come in, Sarah, and let me introduce you to Betty.” Turning to Betty, she said, “Betty, this is my colleague Sarah. We often have chats, about what’s wrong with the university.” She said this with a slight chuckle, and Sarah just smiled pleasantly. “Sarah, Betty and I have been discussing ways to access library databases, by those who aren’t working or studying here. She’s come up with a good list.”

Sarah seemed interested, not just out of politeness, and said, “It sounds like just what I need.” Betty wondered why, instead asking, “Would you like to see it?”

Sarah looked over Betty’s list, asked a few questions about it, and expressed appreciation. Betty wondered why Sarah was there and spoke before she knew it. “You’re the first person I’ve seen pass by the whole time I’ve been here.”

Sarah took the hint. “Winnie ... We go back quite a few years, and she has so much experience, I like to catch up when I can. Others don’t appreciate that someone like Winnie is near at hand, yet ignored. It’s silly.”

As they continued talking, Betty felt comfortable, even though she couldn't follow much of what they said about the university. Finally she took her leave, wending her way through the corridors towards the bus stop. To her surprise, Sarah came rushing along to catch up with her. "Winnie told me about your enquiry. Is it okay if I walk with you?"

It was fifteen minutes until the bus arrived, and Sarah asked about Betty and her 'project'. Betty explained, and told about her journal, but somehow it seemed that Sarah already knew something about it.

## 6

# Sarah's day

“Look who’s joining our department!”

Just before leaving for campus, Sarah always scrolled through her emails, looking for anything out of the ordinary, just in case, and today the only one she noticed was this one from April.

Among her colleagues, April was the closest to being a friend, if academic colleagues could actually be friends. Maybe more like friendly rivals. After all, they were in the same department, the same rank. April was a little younger and seemed more ambitious. She was short and always alert and nicely groomed, in standard casual dress, the usual norm on campus, but with something a bit special, maybe earrings, broach or belt, but not so much as to be too different. Her blonde hair with highlights complemented her beautiful brown skin, not that anyone would dare to mention skin colour. April was a nickname for Appialasaia or something like that, reflecting ancestry from several countries.

Sarah read further. April had forwarded a departmental email, adding the cheeky comment that caught Sarah’s attention, signalling something to come that might amuse her, or rile her. This time, it was to rile her, because Sarah had received the same departmental email.

“We are pleased to announce that the honourable Freddy Smith will be joining the Faculty of Social Sciences



as a full professor. With his rich background, he will ...” Sarah didn’t read further, knowing it would be the usual pap sent out with such announcements. Anyway, everyone knew about Freddy Smith, a former diplomat and politician, supposedly a big catch for the university.

Reading this, Sarah felt a surge of anger, and forgave April for her jokey message. Freddy Smith a professor! How unfair! He had never published anything scholarly, never gone through all the hoops, just dropped in at a high level. All his speeches and opinion pieces were probably written by one of his staff. From his photos, he looked shifty, with a sort of condescending knowing grin.

Sarah’s career flashed through her eyes. The long hours doing a PhD, then even longer hours as a postdoc, finally landing a tenurable position and working so so hard to succeed in her discipline, the teaching, committees, research, outreach. Now this Freddy Smith, whoever, some guy — it had to be a guy — was being dropped into the department without the same struggle. She knew it wasn’t easy in political life, but she felt he hadn’t put in the hard yards teaching and researching. And he was coming in as a full professor.

Freddy Smith would probably be charming, a real glad-hander, someone hard to resent, that’s how politicians get ahead, isn’t it? That made her even angrier. She might have to interact with this guy, and maybe even be sucked in and get to like him.

It wasn’t a good way to start the day, but at least she was going to be busy. Maybe she would see Sunny and discuss the new appointment. Where was the money coming from? Supposedly the department was financially

squeezed, with nothing to spare for another position. Maybe the position was being funded by university central funds.

This was a day when Sarah had to be on campus early for a class, and she came in extra early to deal with some ridiculous paperwork concerning her teaching assistants. What was it about? Ah, she had to record her meetings with assistants, ticking boxes about topics they covered in their tutorial classes. It seems like the administration cared more about protecting itself from legal action than helping students learn. What are students going to sue about anyway? Something about disability support, or unfairness in marking, or some other sort of discrimination? None of her students had ever sued the university, or even threatened to, and she didn't know what happened to these ridiculous forms.

Imagining her upcoming lecture, she wondered whether there was a risk, with some students now getting excited about being offended. "Do I need to watch my language? I used to feel relaxed with students but now — after reading stories about cancel culture — I sometimes monitor interactions, just in case. It's ridiculous, really. I'm on board with all the current social justice issues, but you never know, things keep changing."

This train of thought preoccupied Sarah as she collected her materials in preparation for her lecture. "I suppose my views are 'progressive', at least most of them. I've never attended a rally, but I'm sympathetic to causes and support them with donations now and then. Maybe I should do more, but there's no time. Where I can make a difference is in teaching. I'm very careful about being fair and not pushing my views. My favourite tutor, Jake, told

me he is open with his students about his anti-racist sympathies, but there's a risk in that. I overheard some students in one of his classes talking about how they know what to say in assignments. Are students really this cynical?

"I like my approach. I know how to introduce contemporary topics, and the students run with them, and I don't need to state my opinions. In one assignment, I decided to include a same-sex example when listing examples of topics, and several students took this up. They must have seen this as a go-ahead, though I never said a thing about it in class. How good is that?"

Walking down the corridor on the way to her classroom, Sarah noticed the names on the office doors, reflecting on their ranks. This appointment of Freddy Smith was getting to her. He was coming in as a full professor, and he'd probably have one of the extra large offices too. "That's my goal. Full professor, with a big office, maybe even a corner office with windows on two sides." Day-dreaming. The names on the office doors revealed each occupant's status: full professor, associate professor, or merely "Dr." Thinking of a former head of the department, now gone to another university, Sarah felt distaste. "What a hypocrite. He got the job with all this rhetoric of equality, of solidarity with the working class, all that progressive-sounding talk. And some high-sounding theory in his publications, citing the most trendy and esoteric figures in the field. Then when he got the job, he behaved just like a neoliberal, like any old manager, cost-cutting at the expense of lower-level staff while funding visits by his wanker mates."

With these thoughts, Sarah started to chastise herself. Where was her own solidarity with the oppressed? Like the adjuncts who did so much of the teaching on little pay and no job security. God, she was glad she'd missed all that. Yes, she had insecurity years ago, taking postdocs in different countries, but she'd had a research trajectory, that was the way to get ahead. Well, better than being a perpetual adjunct without a hope in hell of getting a tenurable position.

She saw Claire's door ajar. Claire was an experienced scholar, stern-looking and impeccably dressed, but always with plenty to say, a sort of know-it-all. Sarah couldn't resist sticking her head in and asking, "What do you think of this Freddy Smith business? Will he be teaching ...?" Interrupting, Claire launched into a spiel. "He's only going to be a figurehead. He won't be paid or have an office, just swan in now and then to give a guest lecture and grab a bit of attention. Well, he'll probably be reimbursed for travel and lodging and maybe some more but it won't come out of our budget. It was all arranged by a senior executive, who has political contacts. My worry is that we'll somehow be seen as aligned with his political party, though everyone knows he's a sort of renegade."

"Thanks, gotta go, Claire, class beckons." Claire kept talking so Sarah waved goodbye and proceeded. Claire was always filled with gossip, goodness knows where she got her information, and it wasn't always reliable, but what she had said about Freddy Smith's appointment made sense and made her feel a little better.

The class was in a small theatre, but attendance was even smaller. Many students didn't bother to show up. Did

they watch the recorded version? She didn't know. Right now, it was performance time. It wasn't Sarah's favourite activity but she was well prepared. This was the same lecture she'd given the past two years, but she'd spent hours over the past couple of days revising her slides and reminding herself of all the details of the case studies and theory she was going to cover.

While setting up her slides and waiting for students to arrive, she wondered what this was all about. Why have lectures in this day and age? They were outdated half a century ago. Students could learn just as much by reading an article, and several universities, following MIT's example, now put their course materials online. And besides, half the students weren't even listening, just staring at their phones and laptops. Who knows what they were thinking? Were they actually thinking?

Sarah sometimes wondered whether her scepticism about lectures was because she didn't think she was very good at it. Her colleague Graham was an instinctive performer. He inspired students to work hard, and maybe they were attracted by his good looks and charisma. He had an impressive physique, no doubt from working out regularly, and dressed in a down-market style that showed his body to the best effect. Whatever, the students lapped up every word. "Graham may be a good teacher, but research is my thing. After years of postdocs, teaching was a shock. I haven't ever felt all that comfortable. Whoops, time to start."

Once started, the lecture went all right. Sarah was competent, and student comments on her teaching evaluations were satisfactory. She put a lot of effort into preparing

lectures and tried to follow the tips provided in the brief training offered to new academics, for example breaking up the presentation with questions to the class, but it was so hard to fire up the students. They seemed preoccupied with other things, but what? Thank goodness for a little group in the front that seemed to be paying attention to her every word, and smiling when she looked at them.

The students were getting restless, putting papers in their bags. Sarah glanced at the clock. Ah, class time is nearly over and she'd better finish up, and it was good timing, just getting to the end of her slides.

After a few comments about the next assignment, Sarah signed off and the students rushed for the door. Once upon a time, several keen students would stop to talk about the issues, or ask her about this and that, but now they all seemed too busy, or uninterested. Well, most of them had part-time jobs, or maybe they just wanted to check their phones. Sarah wondered whether she could ask them, but that might embarrass whoever she approached, and besides would they be honest to their teacher? Anyway, she was busy herself, with not much spare time, especially today with meetings.

Wait, today is different. Here's Greta, one of the eager students who sit up front, wanting to talk. "Dr Lukowicz, I probably shouldn't ask this, but is it okay to take a political stand in our essays? You're always so non-partisan, and none of us want to say the wrong thing."

"You can take whatever position you like as long as you back it up with facts and arguments. I always appreciate a persuasive argument, even when I disagree with the conclusion."

Greta didn't seem convinced, and Sarah had an idea. "You remember how we've studied agenda-setting theory?" Greta quickly responded, "Yes, the idea is that the mass media doesn't tell people what to think, just what to think *about*." Sarah looked her in the eye and said, "Can you apply that idea to teaching?" Greta took a while. "You mean, your lectures and assignments aim to tell students what to think *about*, not what to think?" Sarah nodded. It was so satisfying when students had insights.

As they departed, Sarah thought, "Does that really let me off the hook? Am I manipulating them just like the mass media? Well, it's for a good cause. It's impossible not to have an influence."

On the way back to her office, she spotted several colleagues near the photocopier and joined in. Gus and Grace were junior academics, young and always seeming enthusiastic. Gus was saying, "... he's going to another job." Grace jumped in, "I heard he's being given a golden handshake. Anything to get rid of him. They probably gave him a glowing reference." Alice was there, just listening and smiling.

Sarah figured they were talking about their dean, Professor Serge, or Sergey as everyone called him, who had been appointed to head their faculty five years ago. Sergey seemed sincere but played favourites, which meant that if you weren't part of his in-group, you missed out on funding opportunities, plush committee appointments and convenient teaching assignments. Sarah thought Sergey was pompous and hypocritical. He looked slimy with his ridiculous expressions and pretentious dress, and hadn't been popular. Good riddance! Was she being unfair?

There had been an announcement about the process for selection of a new dean, but nothing about what was happening to Sergey. Was he pushed? Rumours abounded.

Sarah had no new information to offer, and asked, "How are we going to find out the reason? Could someone just ask Sergey?" Alice was incredulous. "Are you kidding? He'd never tell us. Remember the time he announced the travel policy and we later found out it was based on lies?"

Gus wasn't going to let this slide. "The policy wasn't Sergey's idea. It came from higher up. He was just the fall guy. I wouldn't want to be dean in a fit."

Jocelynn, another faculty member, had just been listening so far. She was a solid member of the department, competent and solid physically too, giving her an air of authority, but she was also playful. She said, "Gus, I bet you'd really like to be dean one day. You're just saying that so we don't think you're ambitious." She was obviously winding Gus up, but he knew it was all in fun and responded, "Oh yes, when I'm dean it'll be cushy for me and the rest of you can kiss goodbye to your promotions and sabbaticals."

Grace, seeing everyone smiling, changed the subject: "Did any of you read the latest book by Zemphyr? I saw a review and it seems his views have shifted a bit." No one responded, and the group broke up. Just now, there seemed little interest in discussing intellectual matters.

Sarah hurried to her office. She had noticed an email from a journal editor and wanted to read it carefully, alone. This was a big-deal journal, one of the most prestigious in the field, the *International Journal of Political Communication Studies*. It was tough to get in, but she and Alice felt



they had a chance with their latest effort. On their initial submission, four reviewers had provided detailed reports, and the editor invited them to “revise and resubmit,” which meant they had a good chance of being published, but it wasn’t guaranteed. They had spent long hours making changes in response to each reviewer’s comments, and preparing a “response to reviewers” document, which was long and took nearly as much effort to prepare as making the changes. After the initial submission, it took five months for the reviews to come back, and they had taken two months to prepare the revised version. Now it was four months after that. Time to see what the editor, Handelberger, had to say.

Awk, it was another revise-and-submit. Handelberger had sent their paper to two of the original reviewers, who were pretty satisfied with their changes but wanted some more detail, and to one new reviewer. The report from the new reviewer was infuriating. He — it must be a man — said nothing nice and made condescending remarks. How could Handelberger let that pass? Well, maybe he realised and was just following protocol. The *IJPCS* received so many submissions that he probably didn’t even read the reports, just glanced at the recommendations. Anyway, there was more work to be done to revise the paper to try to satisfy this new idiot reviewer.

Sarah reflected back on the first paper she had written and how she had felt humiliated and inadequate after receiving scathing reviews. If it hadn’t been for the support from her mentor, she might have given up right then. Now she was tougher, knowing how the system worked. It was a game to get published in the top journals, and often it was

more about conforming to the rules of the game, which meant not trying to do anything truly original and interesting. “Have I become too cautious after lying low so many years to obtain tenure? My own PhD students seem to be more daring, and more committed to causes. Should I be coaching them on playing the game or encouraging their audacity?”

With a shock, Sarah remembered that she too had once been a bit of an intellectual rebel, and more outspoken. Her thoughts were interrupted when April stuck her head in the door. “How about a bite to eat?” They were soon on their way to a nearby café on campus, one they often frequented. Sarah said, “Do you think we’re being too cautious? Intellectually, I mean. I’m worried we’re getting sucked into playing academic games.”

“I know what you mean. I had that thought too when I read something about a book titled *Disciplined Minds*. The author says the process of getting tenure turns us into compliant tools for whoever hires us.”

Sarah looked for the book on her phone and found a summary. “The author was Jeff Schmidt and he was a physicist. Does that help explain anything?”

“You’ve reminded me about the review I read, or maybe it was a podcast. Schmidt lost his job because of writing this book.”

Sarah noted that April was completely serious, and continued in the same vein. “Whether or not he lost his job shouldn’t affect the accuracy of his arguments, should it? And he was in physics. Surely that’s different from the social sciences.”

April's face lit up. It was time for one of her stories. "You know, last week I attended a meeting of the university publicity committee. Some bigwig decided to set up this committee to bring together ideas from different disciplines across campus, to sell the university to students and donors. I was really put off by one of the scientists on the committee, not in physics but in chemistry or electronic engineering or something, and he was just so arrogant. He kept talking about the huge grant that his team had brought in, and he was practically dripping in condescension about our sort of work. 'Soft' he called it. It wasn't so much his language as the tone of his voice whenever he referred to research outside the 'hard sciences'."

Sarah was still fretting about the reviewer's report. "He doesn't understand how hard we work and how difficult our research is. He probably thinks he's brilliant because he can understand some abstruse mathematics that isn't any use to anybody."

"Or maybe his work is especially useful, to the military or some company, like this guy Schmidt said in *Disciplined Minds*. I should read the book, if I ever had time to read a book, laugh out loud."

"If you do, tell me what it says. Right now, just finding the time to think about how to make revisions to this wretched paper is all I can handle."

April continued dissecting the committee meeting. "The scientist was arrogant enough, but he had some competition from others, especially an economist, who seemed to think understanding models of the labour market gave some special insight into how to market the university."

"What's the name of the arrogant scientist?"

“Alex Rushnikov. Why?”

“I just read a puff piece about one of our scientist’s research and, wouldn’t you know, it’s him. You know, the sort of publicity article that makes esoteric studies of molecular whatever sound like they’re the cure for cancer.”

While they were talking, Freida had joined them, sitting quietly and listening. Freida was usually quiet. She seemed to make herself invisible by dressing unobtrusively, looking ordinary in every way. Maybe this was to hide her incisive intellect. Sarah had looked at a couple of her published articles and was impressed. Now, unusually, Freida jumped in with some passion. “Way back when, popularisation was frowned on. Did you ever hear about Carl Sagan, the astronomer who made science interesting to the public? A lot of his peers dissed him for not being a real scientist, but did you know he actually wrote a heap of peer-reviewed papers?”

April hadn’t heard of Sagan but she knew the syndrome. “You know here’s how the thinking goes. ‘My work is scholarly and not many people read it, so if Sagan is popular, his work must be unscholarly.’ It’s totally illogical but how else can you explain hostility to popularisers?”

Sarah was reminded again about her struggles with the paper for *IJPCS*. “Maybe I should put less effort into publishing in refereed journals and write popular pieces for the newspaper.”

Freida was supportive. “Why not? The university public relations unit is now encouraging academics to write for forums like *The Conversation*. It’s quite a change since Sagan’s day. Have you ever tried to get in? It’s almost

easier to stick to refereed journals because at least there you can understand the process.”

“Do you think I should try to promote my research on social media?” Sarah was still fretting over her article. “How would I ever start?”

April, feeling sympathetic, said, “Tell us about your latest work.” Sarah, encouraged, began explaining, and the three of them plotted how to promote Sarah’s research. At least for a while, until they reverted to the usual academic chitchat.

Soon, it was time for a departmental staff meeting. As they walked to the conference room, April moaned, “I hope this finishes early. Surely there’s nothing important on the agenda.” Faculty rules meant the departmental committee had to meet at least four times per year, with minutes of the previous meeting circulated beforehand, agenda items prepared, and various members expected to give reports, for example on undergraduate student matters, research funding, and of course finances.

As the chair called the meeting to order, Sarah let her mind wander. It was all so familiar and so routine. A few of the others went through emails on their phones, but Sarah thought this was rude and resisted the urge. Instead, she had come up with a different task to keep her attentive. She noticed who was speaking, how long they spoke, who they looked at while speaking, their tone of voice and anything else that seemed interesting. She studied communication, after all, so why not pay attention to what was going on in front of her? Most studies showed that men were usually dominant, taking up more speaking time and cutting off women speakers more often, but this wasn’t how the

meeting was proceeding. There were more women than men in the room, but even so two of the women were hogging the conversation, more than any of the men. One was April, who was so nice privately but seemed to find meetings a stage for monologues. The other was the department head, the chair, Lucy, who was in charge. Lucy dressed in a stylish professional way with careful makeup, somehow accentuating her authoritative manner. Even though she was the chair, she didn't have to talk so much.

Sarah had used this method of noticing contributions before, and it was continually engrossing, and revealing. Suddenly, though, she heard her name. "Sarah, what do you think about the initiative?" Flustered but enterprising, Sarah responded, "I'd like to hear a bit more about the evidence first." April looked at her in a funny way but no one else seemed to notice. That was close. I'd better be more aware of what people are talking *about*.

Soon, though, there was an agenda item that brought Sarah to full alert. Lucy announced that a selection committee had been formed for a new job in the department, and of course Lucy was on it. No surprise there. Sarah already knew about the job, and she knew one of the prospective applicants, to whom Lucy was very close — maybe even lovers. Shouldn't Lucy be excusing herself from the committee because of this conflict of interest? It was bad enough with all the jockeying for getting someone with the right demographics and research interests. We were constantly reminded of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), enough said. But this conflict of interest due to a close personal relationship — to put it politely — was something else. But how could she bring it up? It was

especially awkward because Lucy's friend ticked several of the DEI boxes.

As the meeting moved on to other topics, Sarah returned to her conversation-monitoring, but before long there was a surprise, and alarm. Lucy proudly announced, "As you might have heard, we have a new member of the department, an honorary appointment, and a really important one. We were able to convince Freddy Smith, whose name and contributions will be familiar to you, to take an honorary professor position in the department. He's known throughout the university, and this is a real coup for the department. So now, we're going to finish this meeting early — thank you all for being here — and retreat to the tearoom for snacks and drinks. It's a special occasion. Freddy will be there to meet each of you."

Sarah's mind was going into overdrive. How should she behave?

It was easier than she expected, because she found a way to distance herself from her emotions, by being an observer, a sort of anthropologist of academic culture. She would watch to see how each of her colleagues interacted with Freddy.

It was a casual affair. Lucy took Freddy around the room, introducing him to one person at a time, and after a while Freddy took the initiative, seeking out those he hadn't met. A politician indeed!

Sarah's observation technique worked at first. April was her usual self, doing lots of talking, while Grant — the oldest and stiffest figure in the department — feigned indifference, being a bit superior. How her colleagues behaved wasn't all that surprising. Sarah was gradually

drawn to observing Freddy's personal style. He listened carefully to April, asking a few questions, and then graciously excused himself to move on. With Grant, he didn't show the least annoyance or offence, and was able to elicit some enthusiasm from Grant, who as usual was self-centred and couldn't pretend to be indifferent about his own work.

Freddy was now coming to speak to her, and suddenly Sarah knew what to do. She would try to get Freddy talking about his career and research interests. That was a sure-fire technique to get him to like her, though in some part of her mind she wondered why she wanted this. But Freddy nearly derailed her plan.

"Dr Lukowicz, I presume. Sarah? Yes?" Sarah nodded as she shook his hand. "I've read a couple of your papers and seen your photo on your staff page. Your work on political communication is of great interest and should be better known, especially in some sympathetic political circles. It would be great to discuss this with you before too long."

As they continued the exchange, which went on longer than with any of her colleagues, or so it felt like, Freddy seemed so utterly sincere that Sarah was nearly blown away, forgetting her anger about his appointment and thinking instead that this may be a real opportunity. He was personable, knowledgeable and not at all like the stereotype of an arrogant politician, though she knew that not everyone fit the stereotype, and she of all people was aware of some degree of diversity among politicians — just like there was some diversity among scholars.



After Freddy moved on, Sarah was glowing, though with a niggling doubt. "Have I been sucked in? Is he actually interested in my work? Or maybe he's a sophisticated predator, interested in me. Well, whatever, I can handle it." Sarah was mostly relieved that she had navigated an emotionally fraught engagement with aplomb, and proud that she had reevaluated her initial emotional reaction to the appointment.

The get-together with Freddy was over and Sarah headed to her office. There was just enough time to work on her grant application before the afternoon seminar. It was a busy day indeed.

The grant application was her top priority, and she'd need to finish a full draft within the next few days, having left it all too late, as usual. The university had made obtaining research grants from external sources a really big deal. For Sarah, it was important as one of the few ways to reduce her teaching load.

Sarah's previous proposal was bold, questioning some of fundamental assumptions in the field, but it was unsuccessful, and some of the assessors' reports were hostile. Sarah knew the odds were against her, with less than one in five applications funded, so maybe she was just unlucky. If her application had been sent to different assessors, the outcome might have been different. She knew this at an intellectual level, but it didn't matter: she had decided to apply for a more modest project, one that didn't push boundaries and hopefully wouldn't offend the assessors.

She remembered advice she had heard at a meeting for research grant applicants. The guest at the meeting was Professor Nguyen, a top scholar who was visiting the

university and who had served on one of the panels for the research grant committee. Nguyen explained how it worked. If one of the panellists likes your proposal, you have a chance, as they'll push for it in the horse-trading on the panel. But if the panel member to whom your proposal was assigned wasn't excited by it, kiss your chances goodbye. Maybe a bold proposal was a better idea. But now it's too late, with too much work on the more cautious option, so press on. Play the system to get ahead.

Sarah had heard how some scientists did it. They applied for grants to do projects they had already started or even finished. This way, they could be really convincing about how they would proceed and what they'd find. When they got the grant, they'd use it for a new project, rather than the one they'd applied for, and this way keep the money rolling in. "If only I could get on the grant treadmill, I'd be able to buy myself out of teaching, hire some assistants and tackle really big projects." Sarah was day-dreaming, and knew it. Back to this wretched application. Writing one of these took more effort than writing an academic paper, and that's saying something given all the work put into this one for the *IJPCS*.

Quelling her ruminations, Sarah worked steadily on her application for the next hour, even ignoring the little beeps indicating that messages had arrived. Once she became focused, time seemed to fly. But at the end of the hour, she began pondering again. Why was getting grants so important? To be honest, she didn't much need them for most of her research, which relied on publicly available materials. The goofy thing was that getting a grant was more prestigious than publishing a paper, even though

grants logically were only means for doing research, not the output. Maybe getting a grant was prestigious because it meant peers recognised the quality of your research. Or maybe it was because the university just wanted to bring in more money.

Sarah knew that scientists were reliant on grants to run their labs, and without external funding they were screwed. No wonder they were so innovative in playing the grant game and in touting their work. But fortunately it was different for her. Each grant she received was like an award — well, grants are called awards. Getting a grant was an endorsement of professional status, of respect from peers, of superiority in the quest for research excellence. Sarah knew, at one level, that this was bunkum. Too much depended on the luck of the draw, on the panellist who took carriage of your application and the assessors it was sent to. But it was hard to escape the emotional power of the process, of the fateful judgement when awards were announced. She's heard about one scientist who broke into tears when the word came through that his application had failed. Or was it when it was successful? Anyway, the stakes were high.

Working on her application sent Sarah into a contemplative mood, and she remembered a conversation with April.

“Sarah, what do you think about Sven Stoltz? To meet him, you wouldn't think he'd be much of a teacher, especially with his peculiar accent and sloppy dress. He'd be lucky to remember to comb his hair. But students love him. He gets the highest teacher ratings I've ever seen.”

“How do you know?”

“I was on a committee for the Bell Award for teacher excellence. Sven had an outstanding application. What seems so unfair is that he has absolutely no chance of a tenure-track job. Why should researchers get ahead when the best teachers are mostly stuck at the lowest ranks?”

Sarah, at the time, hadn't been able to come up with a plausible answer. She spluttered, “Maybe because researchers bring in more money, by research grants.”

April immediately countered, “But teachers like Sven sell the university to potential students. Imagine the ripple effect when his students talk to parents and friends. How many undergrads have the slightest idea about whether their teachers are big-time researchers?”

Sarah tried again. “Maybe research is prized because it's so difficult.”

April again had a counter. “But surely it's not easy to be a charismatic teacher, otherwise you and I would have undergraduates clamouring to continue their studies with us, even to do advanced degrees.”

Sarah shuddered, remembering her challenges in the classroom. That was today, of course, but April was right. Teaching well wasn't easy. Was that the reason she put so much energy into research? Or was it because research was the road to advancement?

If so, it wasn't easy either. Back to the grant application. She might never be a star researcher, but that was a better prospect than being a star teacher going nowhere career-wise.

Thinking about her career, Sarah remembered a conference where she had a conversation with Kiyoko, considered one of the top scholars in the country in her

field. Kiyoko, originally from Japan, looked conventional in every way, nothing pretentious, but talked with quiet confidence. Sarah was bitching about her job. "Getting stuck where I am now would be horrible. Think of decades in a backwater where everyone takes me for granted. There's so much backbiting and people stuck in the mud whose only goal is to undermine those who try to achieve, who try to innovate in teaching and research."

It was quite a rave. Kiyoko brought her down to earth. "You think it's easy here at Snobbery U? Yes, it's considered an elite institution. So what? My colleagues don't talk much with each other. They wouldn't want to share their precious ideas, because they're all out for #1, and outsiders get no support. I wouldn't mind trading places with you, just to be in a place where people took notice of each other."

Sarah tried another tack. "But it must be exciting to be in the same place as so many big names."

"Are you kidding? They don't have time for the likes of me. Oh, they're polite but that's all. And they're just as involved in academic games as anyone else, probably more."

Kiyoko stared Sarah in the face and became more bitter. "And some of those big names aren't what you think. They have loads of graduate students and postdocs and insist on having their names on every paper they write. And a few get their undergraduate assistants to investigate topics, write up summaries and then use the text as their own, without acknowledgement. If anyone knew all about it, it would be a scandal."

Sarah had vaguely heard about this sort of exploitation, but never from anyone close to it. She cautiously

asked, "How did you find out about it? Have you talked with some of these graduate students and postdocs?"

Kiyoko was becoming agitated. "Students in my classes have told me some stories, and at social events I've heard worse ones. There's plenty of gossiping. You know what Henry Kissinger, that famous — or infamous — statesman, said? 'The reason academic battles are so bitter is because the stakes are so small'."

Now they were on the same wavelength. Sarah knew another Kissinger quote: "He also said, 'After the complexities of university politics, I long for the simplicity of the Middle East'." They laughed.

"Ah, the Middle East. You think those countries are corrupt? What happens at my university, the wheeling and dealing to get big grants, would make you cringe. Having a conflict of interest seems to be a requirement."

Sarah was now reconsidering her assessment.

Kiyoko had a different thought. "There are some big names on your campus, maybe not in your department, but there's nothing stopping you from waltzing up and having a chat, is there?"

At this memory, Sarah winced. She was focusing on all the negatives around her, not the opportunities and prospects. Kiyoko had said there were big names here too, so why hadn't she thought to approach them? Well, they were in engineering, law and education. Then she thought of Freddy Smith. Wasn't he a big name?

Her computer pinged. It was nearly time for the seminar, and Sarah felt she needed to make an appearance. It wasn't good to miss too many of them, and the topic was vaguely interesting, by a visiting scholar. Arriving a few

minutes early, Sarah sat at the back of the small room. Only rarely did more than a dozen people attend these specialist seminars.

Toluride sat next to her. He was a short boyish fellow from another department, well dressed with one distinctive feature, garish running shoes, though from his physique Sarah guessed that he never went running. Toluride sat on several high-level university committees, though why she could never guess. Perhaps it was his friendly personal style; he knew everyone, and after a greeting he immediately whispered conspiratorially, "I've just come from the Finance Committee. Things look grim. There are going to be some cuts, maybe an entire department. But you're safe here. It wouldn't be a good look to make a cut just when Freddy Smith is joining."

Sarah shivered when he mentioned cuts. Why couldn't there be some stability, some security, without worrying about student numbers, budgets and all that stuff? But as much as Toluride's warning had alarmed her, his following comment reassured her, though with a peculiar feeling. Freddy Smith's name kept popping up.

It was time to begin. Gus, the departmental seminar coordinator, introduced the visiting speaker, who began. Sarah hoped for something intellectually stimulating, or at least entertaining. But it wasn't to be. The speaker was a senior figure who was passing through, an older guy who dressed like he thought highly of himself, or maybe it was just the way he spoke, with a slightly condescending tone. Only a minute in, he was dropping names and theories, and Sarah couldn't follow what he was getting at. Was she stupid? Why did the others in the audience look like they

understood? Was she the only one who was out of her depth? Then she remembered what she had read about the imposter syndrome, when competent people felt they didn't deserve to be where they were, and that at any time others would discover they were frauds. Sarah knew logically that she was a good scholar, and this was just her inner critic speaking, trying to undermine her confidence. Fine, but it would take more courage than she had to ask a naïve question.

The speaker paused briefly and there was a query from someone else in the audience. This was unusual, because the usual seminar protocol was to wait until the end before question time. "Can you explain what you meant by 'political circularity'? Sorry, it's new to me."

Sarah looked over. It was Freddy Smith! He was confident enough to ask a question showing his ignorance, and Sarah was appreciative and, she guessed, so was everyone else. This speaker wasn't explaining his ideas well, but they had all been willing to sit there in silence and pretend they got it.

Somehow Sarah sat through the rest of the seminar. Freddy's question had softened the speaker, who may have been uncomfortable himself, trying to impress the audience but succeeding only in being obscure. Freddy asked one or two further questions along the way, which helped make the proceedings more engaging, and before long the talk was over and it was formal question time. Sarah braced herself for a long-winded comment from Gus, which didn't really have a question but just wanted to show his knowledge, but it didn't come. Freddy's questions during the talk had helped promote a more genuine exchange of ideas.



Time was up and Sarah had to race to her office. As she left, she caught Freddy's eye and said, "Thanks for your questions during the talk. They really helped — helped all of us." He just nodded and smiled. She didn't know how she had the courage to talk to him.

Back in her office, it was time for one more meeting. A young PhD student, Fraser, had asked to see her in person. They met in her office. She didn't really know him, except that he seemed nice enough and did a lot of teaching in the department. He looked bookish, wearing glasses and rumpled clothing, and he spoke in slightly soft, tentative way.

"Thank you Professor Lukowitz for seeing me. I wanted to ask your advice. You see, I want to pursue an academic career and you seem to be the sort of person who has it all together, who knows where they're going. I'd rather talk with you because ..." — dropping his voice so she could barely hear it — "I'd rather not raise this with my supervisors, in case they think I'm getting above myself."

Sarah thought this was a bit strange, but she was flattered. "Why exactly do you want to be an academic?"

"With my undergraduate projects, and now starting to work on my thesis, I just really love research. Teaching is okay too. It seems like the place to be."

"Are you sure? Isn't there something else you could do? If you couldn't get an academic post, what else could you do?"

Ignoring her question, Fraser pressed on. "I'm willing to do what it takes. Long hours, lots of study. I'm a hard worker. But I need to know how to direct my energies to maximise my chances."

“Look, the academic life is not as attractive as it seems. You have no idea of the hassles we have to put up with, the endless demands, the excessive expectations and the terrible bureaucracy. Maybe things were more cushy years ago, but the university is now more like a business, and we’re just cogs in the machine, pumping out graduates and publications.”

“Yes, yes, actually I know all about that. My supervisors have been trying to discourage me from an academic career from the beginning, but they still took on my PhD project. I see you as someone who’s found the right balance. What is it that gives you satisfaction in the job?”

That was a shift. Sarah was so used to complaining that it took a moment to switch gears and think about the positives.

“Good question. For sure, there are satisfactions. Research can be engrossing. We get to pick our research topics, which means we can move on to something new if the old one gets boring. It’s not like being a doctor who sees the same medical conditions year after year. We can adapt according to our interests. Have you heard of ‘flow’, when you’re totally engrossed in an activity, so much that you lose your sense of time? Research seems perfect for getting into a flow state.”

In saying this, Sarah realised why she and her colleagues were always wanting more time for research.

“Yes, the more research I do, the more I want to do.”

“The problem is the distractions, the endless emails, the bureaucratic frustrations. There’s so much that gets in the way of the joy of research.”

“But it still seems worth trying for this sort of career. Can you tell me more about what you feel makes academic life worthwhile?”

For such a young fellow, Fraser seemed remarkably focused and level-headed. Maybe he had a chance.

“The social side of the job can be satisfying. My colleagues aren’t exactly friends, well, they are in a way, it’s just good to be able to talk about things with others who know what it’s like, teaching, current affairs, personalities, anything really.”

“And what about research collaboration? My PhD is more a solo affair, but I’ve heard from scientist friends that they spend a lot of time in the lab working together with other students and supervisors.”

“You’re right, collaboration can be very satisfying, but in our field we don’t usually have daily interaction with research students. Perhaps that’s our loss.”

“What do I need to do now to make it? Can you give me some tips?” Fraser seemed genuine.

“Tell me where you stand now. Do you have any publications? Are any being planned?”

Fraser explained that he didn’t have any, but he had some ideas, but didn’t really know how to get started. “My supervisors seem to think I should put my energy into my thesis, and do publications later. But my friends in science and engineering are co-authoring as they go along. By the time they finish they’ll have five or ten articles. How can I compete with that when going for postdocs?”

Sarah was impressed. He was already thinking of postdocs. “Your best chance is to concentrate on research. Teaching doesn’t matter that much, certainly not for

postdocs. But don't despair. Let me tell you what I heard at a workshop."

Fraser was listening intently, so Sarah continued. "There was a senior academic at this meeting, Gupta, who said the median output of academics was one paper per year. It's not so much."

Fraser objected. "How could that be, when I know these students with more than that, and the research leaders have ten or more papers per year?"

"The trick is to divide each paper by the number of co-authors. If you and I co-author an article, that would count as half a paper each. Gupta said that when authorship is 'standardised' this way, the totals for different disciplines are surprisingly similar. In philosophy, most papers are sole-authored, and the median is one paper per year. Maybe in chemistry, the median is five papers per year, each with five authors."

"But five papers *sounds* so much more impressive. Do you think anyone besides Gupta thinks this way?"

"Probably not, but there's an equivalent. When committees look at applications from across campus, they compare output to 'disciplinary norms', namely the typical publication rates in different fields. No one expects someone in politics to publish five single-authored papers per year. Or if you do, you'd be a star performer."

"Okay, that's reassuring, but I need to get started. Can I tell you about my ideas?"

Half an hour later, they finished. As he left, Fraser was effusive with his thanks. Sarah said, "Any time. Do stop by again. It was a pleasure." And it was. Sarah felt that

conversations like this were what universities should be all about.

## 6A

### Explaining Sarah's day

Sarah and Francine met in the university bar. Sarah picked a spot where they wouldn't be disturbed; there were colleagues she'd be pleased to meet, but at another time. Sarah had a glass of white wine, Francine an orange juice. After pleasantries, they got straight to business.

"Sarah, I'm really impressed. When I asked if you'd write something explaining what it's like to be an academic — so activists can better understand when they come knocking — I didn't expect you to go to so much trouble."

"Well, it was fun writing 'Sarah's day'. It's fictional, but true to life. Initially I wrote a list of every feature of university life I could think of. I'll send it to you, just for the record. Probably I missed some points, but anyway the list seemed so dry and lifeless."

"What inspired you to write a true-fiction story?"

"Well, I'd been reading some novels. It's my relaxation. And I thought, why not turn my boring list of features into a story? Once I got started, it became ... almost addictive."

"Is it ... how can I say this? ... how much is your own experience? ... you know, Freddy Smith ..."

"Ah, Freddy is entirely fictional. It's not even a pseudonym. I've never encountered anyone like him. You'd know that, wouldn't you?"

“Well, maybe ... if Freddie was a woman.”

“Not even then. I thought of making Freddie female. That would add an extra *frisson* to the story, but I thought that would be distracting. Despite what happens in some novels, what really drives academics is jobs, status, resentments. I don't know, really. Academics are different ... different from each other, that is. No one story can represent the full complexity of academic life.”

“Maybe not, but I think ‘Sarah's day’ will speak to others. Have you ever had a day like it?”

“Maybe years ago — no, not even then. It's a dramatic device to have things piling up at one time. In recent years, many of my colleagues are hardly ever in their offices. But I didn't think a story about Zoom meetings would be very interesting. Maybe I should have tried. I do prefer face-to-face.”

“You've made your fictional Sarah into someone who seems ... could I say self-centred? Is that you? I don't think so.”

“Actually, I tried to make Sarah into a ‘typical’ ...” Sarah gestured broadly towards the bar and beyond. “A typical ambitious academic. She's worked really hard to make it, and that's bound to shape the way she sees the world.”

“Is there a bit of her in you?”

“Of course. But I hope not too much.”

They continued their chat, enjoying time together, talking about all sorts of things.

## 7

# Talking about skills

Winnie was in her element — talking. “When I was young ... That was a long time ago, you know, so long ago that the Dead Sea was still alive ...” She laughed at her own joke, though she had told it many times. She loved jokes about ageing, perhaps because she was doing it so well.

“When I was young, no longer a teenager, I must have been an undergrad, I noticed an ad for a course titled ‘Efficient reading’. It was one of the most useful things for my career.”

Winnie was talking to Francine and Sarah. It was late in the afternoon of a warm day, near a small outdoor campus drinks place. Francine had invited them to share ideas about skills that had helped them become productive researchers. It was an offer hard to resist. Francine kept saying they must have some really well-developed skills because they had had such productive careers.

Sarah had a cappuccino, Winnie a cup of tea, and Francine kombucha. Always health-conscious, Francine had brought along mixed nuts and fruit.

Francine and Sarah knew Winnie loved to talk. On this occasion, they were happy to listen, for the most part.

“You see, the majority of people tend to read at a slow pace, perhaps around 200 to 300 words per minute. Now, if you do the calculation, for a 100,000-word book, that amounts to five to eight hours of reading. That’s a big

investment. When it's a novel and you're reading for pleasure, that's fine — you want to savour the experience. But when it comes to academic papers and books, not to mention administrative documents, it's quite a different matter altogether."

Sarah tried to remember when she had last read an academic book cover to cover. It was a bit embarrassing. She interrupted Winnie's flow. "You mean when you were young, you actually read books, academic books,?"

Winnie smiled. "Don't you believe I was ever young?" She laughed, almost snorted. "Yes, I 'read' entire books, but not the way most readers do. And no, we didn't have all that much free time in the old days, when women had to work three times as hard to get ahead. Now it's only twice as hard." Winnie was in her element.

"Doubling your reading speed is certainly an achievable goal, but you can go even faster, perhaps reading a book in an hour, or even half an hour. Is that possible? It absolutely is!"

"During the efficient-reading course, we were introduced to techniques to accelerate our reading speeds. One was putting a ruler under the line of text we were reading, and moving it down the page, and moving it down faster as we improved." Winnie used a pen to illustrate the process. "The idea was to gradually push ourselves out of the slow-reading comfort zone, until a faster speed became second nature, and then repeat the process."

"If it currently takes you eight hours to read a book, and you can learn to read at twice the speed, you've saved yourself four hours. Now, if you can manage to read four times as fast ..." Winnie pulled a book out of her bag and



pretended to go through it, turning the pages one after the other.

Francine asked, "But what about taking it all in? Surely you're going to miss a lot."

Winnie answered immediately, looking in turn at each of them. "Think back on a book you read a year or two ago. Can you remember its key ideas? Could you write an accurate summary?"

Francine smiled to herself. She was taking down a brief summary of what Winnie was saying, and then decided to say it out loud.

"Like me writing a summary of what you're saying just now?"

Winnie wasn't bothered at all. "Exactly. Can we come to that later?" She continued.

"For most people, when they read, they retain very few specific details. The idea with speed reading is to capture key ideas, the ones that matter the most to *you*. Studies show this is achievable even when you're reading much faster. But is speed really the goal? The course I took was called 'efficient reading', not speed reading. We were told that reading should vary in pace depending on our purpose. Sometimes, you need to slow down and reread crucial sections to make sure you understand. Sometimes you should only skim pages enough to know you don't need to read them carefully."

Winnie grinned and raised a finger, and Sarah knew the next bit wouldn't be serious. "Do you know the rule for calculating how many pages of a book you need to read before you decide it's worth finishing it?" Sarah shook her head. "You take your age and subtract it from 100. The

older you get, the less time you want to waste before your time's up. Ha! Before long, I'll only need to look at the cover!" Francine and Sarah laughed. They guessed Winnie was in her 80s, well short of 100.

"There's an important idea here. It's perfectly acceptable to quit reading a book. It might initially seem engaging or relevant, and you start it wanting to finish it. But starting a book doesn't obligate you to see it through to the end. When I was much younger, I attempted to read James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. It's a renowned work, but also notoriously difficult to decipher. If I had been an aspiring novelist or literary scholar, I might have pressed on, perhaps reading it multiple times. But I was reading purely for pleasure, so I gave up, and have had no regrets about that decision."

Sarah wondered how Winnie did it. What a great idea, to read faster and more tactically.

Francine was thinking of the connection between Winnie's reading techniques and what Roberto had learned from Pav about reading an academic article. She wondered whether techniques of "efficient reading" could be applied to "efficient conversations." Meeting with Winnie and Sarah was enjoyable but she didn't have forever. It was time to stem Winnie's flow.

"Tell me about another skill that's helped make you so productive."

Winnie responded immediately. "Typing." She mimed using all her fingers on a keyboard.

"I was thinking of research-related skills."

"Well, if you can type twice as fast, think how many hours that will save. Sarah, you remember Adrian?" Winnie

now mimed a two-finger typist, a very slow one. “For much of his career, in business, he had a secretary who would handle all his typing, usually from dictation. However, with the advent of desktop computers, secretary positions gradually disappeared, and most of us found ourselves having to type our own documents.”

Sarah interjected, “Well, of course, all those secretaries were women and their bosses were men. It’s about time.”

Winnie finished her two-finger mime, and went back to the previous one with all her fingers. “Back in the day, women were expected to learn how to type. I did, on a manual typewriter, if you can imagine that. But it’s turned out to be an absolute blessing. I’ve saved a huge amount of time over the years.”

Sarah had pulled out her phone and now mimed punching in a message with her thumbs going a tremendous speed. “Is this the future?”

Winnie winced. “Be careful, you might injure yourself from repetitive motions. Now, I’m not here to convince you to learn touch typing, but I must say, it’s been invaluable for me. I absolutely dislike using phones like you do. It feels like regressing from walking to crawling. With enough practice, you can crawl quite quickly, but it’s far easier, and more efficient, to walk, or even jog.”

Francine raised her hand to get their attention. “Winnie, isn’t your point that it’s worth spending the time and effort to learn a skill, to save time in the long run?”

Winnie was appreciative. “Exactly right. So many of my colleagues over the years, it seems they never thought

of this. They just kept doing things the way they'd always done them."

Sarah had been reflecting on her own use of keyboards. "What if voice recognition gets so good that typing, and keyboards, become obsolete? Cheryl hurt her hand and switched to voice-to-text."

Winnie was prepared for this. "Yes, quite right. But to pick up on Francine's point — indeed, it's the crux of the matter — aren't there skills to be practised in speaking, including speaking to create written text? The essential element here is to be willing to invest in the necessary time and effort to master new ways of doing things. It is by no means easy. And I'm yet to see many researchers taking it up with enthusiasm."

Francine looked up from her note-taking and said, "What's next?"

Winnie chuckled. "It's what you're doing right now. Taking notes. Let me tell you ..."

Sarah interrupted. "Can I tell you about note-taking? At first anyway?" Winnie gestured to go ahead.

"About five years ago, I was talking with Winnie and moaning about my problems with references for an article I was writing. It's such a pain, and it seems like more references are expected all the time. Anyway, Winnie told me about her system for taking notes about articles and books she read. It was an eye-opener, because I had always just read things and never kept any record except bibliographical information and copies, you know photocopies of articles and the books on my office shelves and pdfs on my computer." She waved her arms to suggest their large extent.

"It was getting to be too much. I had all this stuff but couldn't recall what I needed. No wonder so many colleagues just copy references from other papers without reading them." Sarah winked at Winnie, who again chuckled.

"Winnie told me about her system. It's simple, really. After reading an article, just write some notes about it, trying to do it from memory rather than copying text, like the abstract. It took me a while to get into the swing of it. Now I've got an increasingly large file of notes. Sometimes I return to them, but there are other advantages, aren't there, Winnie?" Sarah turned to suggest that Winnie continue, and Winnie didn't need much encouragement.

"I love to read, if you hadn't noticed. Taking notes on what I read slows me down. It makes me think about what I'm reading. Thinking is the crucial part. We don't do enough of it, really thinking hard about the issues we care about. Anyway, writing isn't just recording what we've thought about, it's a form of thinking itself. So taking notes has been a sort of enforced thinking."

Francine looked up from taking notes. "Winnie — and Sarah too — can I ask you something? You take notes on what you read. Do you ever take notes on your conversations?"

Sarah asked, "Like when doing interviews?"

Francine slightly lifted her notepad, to highlight her note-taking. "Well, yes, but what about when you're the one being interviewed? And what about phone calls? Do you ever take notes on them?"

Sarah and Winnie stared at Francine, seeming to see her in a different way. They spoke almost simultaneously. “Do you?”

“I do. I do lots of networking, and often hear people’s stories, at length. Afterwards, I write down some key points. Sometimes, I talk to the same person, but it’s months later, even years, and I’ve forgotten most of what they told me before. Checking my notes refreshes my memory. It helps prevent me seeming like a total fool!” Francine laughed, although until then she’d been quite serious.

Sarah and Winnie didn’t respond for a little while. They were feeling similar emotions, feeling that there they were treating Francine as if she were like a student, learning from them, while actually she knew more than they realised. They could even learn from her.

Winnie recovered soonest. “I wish I had done that when I was younger. Going through bitter academic battles ...” — she glanced meaningfully at Sarah — “I kept a diary, but now I wish I had diarised phone calls and meetings. Sarah, what about you?”

Sarah looked into the distance. “I’m thinking ... I’m thinking about the possibilities. Thanks, Francine.” And she jotted a few words into her phone. “And can you send me — us — your notes on what we’re talking about now? They’ll help me get started.”

Francine said, “Sure.” She waited a little bit before asking, “Is there some other skill you’d like to discuss? There’s one that interests me. It’s how to organise all the stuff I collect, my notes, and articles. And you have so many books, don’t you? Actually, let me tell you a story. I visited the office of a major environmental organisation, and you

wouldn't believe the mess. Papers everywhere, and when I asked about their electronic files ..."

Winnie interjected. "In my experience, it's no different for academics. I recall, back in the old days when we regularly printed out articles, there was one PhD student with whole boxes of articles on the floor. Whenever she thought of some quote or point she needed to cite, she'd search for the article where she'd originally read it, and spend hours going through those boxes."

Sarah joined in. "Sounds like me, except my challenge is to search the files on my laptop. I know the things I want are there somewhere, but finding them ... well, even with the search function, it's frustrating."

Francine tried to summarise. "So would you say that having a good filing system is a useful skill? For doing research?"

Winnie and Sarah both opened their mouths to speak, obviously to agree. Winnie jumped in first. "Yes. But what system?" Looking at Sarah, she said, "Mine is out of date. If I were starting my career now ... what would *you* recommend?"

Sarah was tentative. "I'm not sure. Maybe it depends on the person and the project." She turned. "What do you think, Francine?"

"Well, I developed my own system, but it took a while to refine it, to get it to do what I wanted. And, like you said, it depends on the person." Francine paused; the others didn't interrupt.

"I've watched activists in the middle of campaigns. Everything is so urgent, they don't take any time to file anything. It's just a mess, left for later. And there never is a

later, because there's always a new urgent campaign. So I guess my point is that the important thing about filing is to put the time in to do it, rather than postponing it. You know, 'A stitch in time ...'"

Winnie completed the saying. "Saves nine. You've hit the nail on the head, Francine, to use a different metaphor. Filing isn't all that difficult but it's important, and it's worth spending time and effort to do it well. There are so many benefits later on."

Francine had been taking notes, and looked up. "You know what I wish? That I had taken more notes, like after meetings, and set up a good system for filing them. Imagine going through a diary of a campaign and trying to extract insights. Activists are continually reinventing the wheel."

Just then Sarah's phone rang. "Sorry, I thought I'd put it on silent."

Winnie said, "Ah, this reminds me of another skill. It's the ability to deal with distractions, to ignore them or avoid them. Let me ask you, how many times per day do you check your phone?"

Sarah hoped Winnie wasn't asking her. Francine thought the same thing. Finally Francine responded. "I don't know, but it's a lot. For my job, when I'm on call, and all the rest of the time, it's central to what I do."

Winnie asked, "Do you ever turn it off or put it away? What about when you're in bed?"

Francine had an aha moment. "It's my rule to turn off my phone whenever I'm in an important meeting. Like with you two right now. I'm guessing what you're going to say, Winnie. If you want to do something that's important, turn off your phone — and turn off other distractions."



Winnie smiled. "Quite right. In some respects, that's been the key to my success, at least in the academic realm. Research time is precious, so I establish sacred periods, completely shielded from any interruptions. Back in the day, it was the children — I'll spare you the details on that. But, truthfully, it's only become more challenging with the internet and now social media. I've watched highly talented colleagues succumb to the temptations of the little screen."

Winnie was looking at Sarah, with a compassionate expression. Sarah looked embarrassed, and asked Winnie, "How have you coped? You seem almost unaffected by the new technology."

"I don't have a phone."

Sarah gasped.

Winnie continued. "Well, I do, but usually it's turned off. It's for online banking — what's it called? — two-factor authorisation?"

Sarah corrected, "Two-factor authentication. Is that all? What about emergencies? What about when you're out?"

Winnie laughed. "You must remember that I grew up before mobile phones, before the Internet. Believe it or not, we managed perfectly well back then. It's the younger generation who seem unable to cope without it. All those students wandering around campus, not watching where they're going, their eyes fixed on those little screens and their thumbs whizzing away. Talk about being distracted. They wouldn't see an emergency if it were right under their noses."

Francine asked, “So I’m guessing you don’t spend time on social media. Or surfing the web. What about YouTube?”

Winnie responded. “It’s difficult to resist, I must admit. I’ve tested myself a few times and discovered how alluring it all is online. I don’t use my phone terribly often, but for writing and email, I’m on my laptop, and I can quite see why so many get hooked.”

Francine decided she knew more about this, and took a more active role. “Social media companies hire the brightest psychologists, whose task is to keep you hooked. Why? Because that’s how they make money. The more you’re on a platform, the more money they make from advertisers and the more data they collect about you and your likes. When something provided by a company seems to be free, it usually means that you are the product, being sold to advertisers.”

Sarah asked, “What do you do to resist, Francine? From what I know, you’re really active.”

Francine: “The solutions are simple but can be incredibly difficult to carry out. If it’s chocolates in the office, put them in the filing cabinet or, better yet, don’t have any in the office at all. If you’re a chocoholic, don’t buy any in the first place. I ought to know, that’s me.”

Sarah quietly said, “Me too.”

Francine continued. “If you want to eat healthier foods, put apples and oranges on the kitchen counter, and hide potato crisps. If you want to quit smoking, stop going to social events where there are lots of smokers. If you want to exercise more, arrange your day so you need to walk, and find someone to walk with. The list could go on. The basic

idea is to arrange your life to limit temptations. You use your willpower to make the arrangements, not to resist repeated temptations.”

Francine pulled out her phone to make a point, mimicking urgently responding to a message. “Phones, emails, texts and social media can become addictive. We think of addictions as physiological, as cravings for drugs, but they can also be behavioural. Having a phone in your pocket and hearing it buzz can produce an automatic impulse to check it. Studies show that the typical user checks their phone hundreds of times during the day, and touches it thousands of times. I read about this because I was seeing too many of those around me distracted nearly all the time.”

Sarah was impressed, but still wanted to know more. “Okay, cutting back on phone use sounds like number one. But how do I get more time for reading and writing?”

Winnie had been listening patiently, and now jumped in to answer. “When I was writing my PhD thesis, all those years ago, there were certainly distractions, even before the Internet. In many ways, my biggest distraction was my own mind, urging me to do something else, like tidy the house when I was at home, or go for a chat with other students when I was on campus. My solution was to get into my office, shut the door, take the phone off the hook, and tell everyone not to disturb me unless there was a nuclear emergency. Eventually, they got the message. It was hardly easy, though.”

Francine smiled. “I do something similar. When I’m working on something important, I turn off anything and everything that might interrupt. It works for me when I do

this first thing in the morning, or whenever I get up after a night shift. I've worked out a method for me. What's hard is helping others — I'm thinking of activists — to find their own solutions."

Sarah sighed. "Well, you won't find solutions here on campus, except Winnie of course. Most of my colleagues seem just as susceptible to Internet addictions as anyone else, and, you know what, when people are more intelligent — I shouldn't say that, it sounds patronising — when we've spent years developing our intellectual skills, we're better at rationalising what we do. That includes addictive media use."

Francine asked, "What do you mean — rationalising?"

Sarah said, "They give plausible explanations, excuses really, for spending so much time online. Like, 'I need to be available to my students' or 'I need to keep up with current events' or 'I'm studying ideologically layered expressions on social media.' Give me a break. How about 'I enjoy cat videos!'"

They all laughed. At this, Winnie said, "Will you join me on a little stroll, a detour, back to my office? One of the advantages of being given an office on the edge of campus is that there's a park nearby, and I love to walk around in it. Some of those trees are older than me!"

Winnie set off at a brisk pace. Soon after they started, she said, "This reminds me of something else. It's not a skill, exactly, but it's valuable for any researcher: keeping fit. It's good for thinking. It's just what you said, Francine. You know the saying, 'Healthy body, healthy mind'." Winnie chuckled and picked up her pace further.

Francine, slightly out of breath, said, "Good diet, too?"

Winnie said, “Yes, yes.” She was getting winded and eased off her pace, allowing Sarah to catch up, and comment, somewhat sarcastically, “I bet you meditate, too.”

Winnie chuckled. “Yes — though I used to think I didn’t need to!”

## 8

# Dining on findings

Riko was pleased. Francine was coming to the Maki Magic again, with four others, like before. Riko was so thankful for Francine's help.

It was a few years ago when Francine came to the restaurant and found Riko in tears. Normally Riko would have been too embarrassed to say anything about why she was upset, but it had just happened, that horrible man Jake Maloney had just left and Riko was in a terrible state, and blurted out to Francine, "I'm going to lose the restaurant!" Francine was so sympathetic that Riko eventually told her what had happened.

Maloney was a food safety and hygiene inspector. His report, if negative, could suspend or even cancel the restaurant's licence. He had calmly said that he found some serious problems — though there weren't any — but he would ignore them if he was rewarded. How did he say it? She couldn't remember his exact words, but his meaning was clear: it was either money or sex. She didn't have the money, and if she refused, Maki Magic would have to close.

Francine was outraged and said she would do something. She asked Riko to request some more time. But Maloney never came again. It was a miracle. She found out from a friend, another woman who owned a restaurant, how it had happened. There was an attractive young union activist named Sabrina who pretended to be the owner of a

new restaurant, with the agreement of the actual owner, an elderly man. When Maloney tried his technique with Sabrina, she pretended to have difficulty understanding what he wanted and encouraged him to explain. She covertly recorded the encounter on her phone, and there was a video as well. After she sent an extract to Maloney's employers, he was quietly dismissed, and probably paid off. They had been aware of what he'd been doing but had never done anything about it. Maybe they were getting some of the money from his extortion.

Riko was relieved in a way she could hardly explain. She was so grateful knowing Francine had helped make it happen. She offered to give Francine and her guests complimentary meals, but Francine said it was better for them to pay like other customers. She said seeing Riko in good spirits was all the reward she needed.

Francine had prepared carefully for this meeting. It was six months since the previous dinner, and they had made progress. Roberto, with Pav's help, had prepared a brief guide to reading an academic article and, more importantly, helping decide when it wasn't worth reading it much or at all. Sarora had developed a preliminary set of ideas about the frameworks activists use to understand the world. Betty had a list of ways to get access to academic articles. Francine had convinced Sarah to describe what it's like to be an academic, so preoccupied with academic matters that thinking about what would be useful for activists was at best an afterthought. Finally, Francine, from her meeting with Winnie and Sarah, had a list of practical skills useful for researchers.

This dinner was different. Francine had invited Sarah and Pav. Francine knew everyone would get along. But would Roberto and Sarora be inhibited in the presence of experienced scholars? Or would Sarah and Pav hold back in the presence of committed activists?

This time, Francine arrived early, before the others, to have time to check in with Riko, and again go through her notes. They had all received copies of everyone's notes. How were they going to proceed? Maybe she didn't need to worry because, she told herself, this one single meeting was not all that crucial. It's what she told herself before every meeting she thought was crucial, and it helped keep her calm. And she must remember that the important thing, or at least one important thing, was cementing relationships. They were the foundation for future efforts.

Roberto was next to arrive, and after greeting Francine, enquired about Betty and Ron. Francine said Betty wasn't feeling so good. About Ron, she just said, "He's fine. I'll tell you more sometime. Okay?" Roberto nodded and said "Okay."

Sarah and Pav arrived together. Roberto and Pav were like old friends, and Roberto was pleased to meet Sarah, saying "I've read so much about you. How's Freddy Smith?" with a big grin. Sarah couldn't help but grin in return.

Finally, Sarora joined them. After introductions, Francine tapped her fork on the table and called out, "Order, order." She seemed a bit nervous, which was not all that common. Perhaps it was because this meeting was so important. "Our topic is, 'What can activists usefully learn from academics?' Who would ..."



Before she could continue, Pav blurted out, "Not a bloody thing!"

Sarah joined in. "If you knew what we know, you'd stay away! So many self-absorbed ..."

Pav didn't let her finish. "They sell themselves to the highest bidder, and you know who's got the most money."

Sarah continued the onslaught. "The trouble with academic thinking — it's tainted, it serves the powerful."

Pav elaborated: "The corporations, the military."

Roberto tried to interrupt. "Climate science. What about it?"

Sarah: "A lot of good it's doing. Nothing much is changing, is it? Not due to universities."

Sarora watched it all, saying nothing. She wondered what was going on.

Francine scrambled out of her seat, stood up and waved both hands above her head while she looked at Pav and Sarah. Pav saw her first and stopped mid-sentence, and then Sarah noticed.

Francine down her arms but remained standing, towering above them. She spoke gently. "Thank you. Can we agree on some rules for how we proceed? Are you willing for me to be our facilitator?"

Roberto and Sarora had taken that for granted, and they realised Francine was saying this for Sarah and Pav. Anyway, everyone nodded or murmured in agreement.

"I'm going to start by suggesting that we sit in a different — a different arrangement."

There were five of them, two on each side of the table and one at what might be considered the head. Sarah was at the head with Pav on her right and Francine on her left, with

Sarora and Roberto further down. “Sarora, can you switch with Sarah? That’s all.” This meant Pav and Sarah were separated. Francine had seen them egging each other on, seeming to demonstrate how cynical they were about academia, laughing as they escalated their condemnations. They were hardly noticing others at the table. Was this some sort of release of on-campus tensions?

After they had settled, Francine noticed Riko hovering, and directed everyone towards their menus. Before long, they had decided on what to order, and meanwhile Sarah and Pav seemed to have calmed down. Eventually, Francine changed the conversation back to business. She directed her initial comments to Sarah and Pav, looking first at one and then the other.

“Sarah, Pav, we really appreciate your willingness to share your great knowledge about the university and especially about what researchers might have to offer to people like me, and Roberto and Sarora.” Roberto agreed with this, even though it sounded a bit excessive, like flattery, and weren’t they all in this together? Then Francine made a surprising request, in her gentle way.

“Would it be okay with you if you always let Roberto and Sarora speak first, before you comment? We appreciate the opportunity to ... ah ... get ...” Francine seemed lost for words, and Roberto jumped in.

“To learn from you by trying out our thoughts first, and then hearing from you.” Roberto looked at Sarora, who was more reserved than others here. Sarora knew this meant she would get a chance to speak.

Pav was about to respond when Sarah kicked him under the table. Pav understood. Now was the time for them to shut up and listen.

Francine had an idea. "Do you know about Edward de Bono and his five thinking hats?" It was blank stares all around, or head shaking. Francine explained that there were five hats, white, black, red, yellow and blue. Each one represented a way of thinking, and if they went through the hats one at a time, this could structure their discussion.

First was the white hat, concerned with information. Francine, to help them keep on track, put a white serviette in the middle of the table. It wasn't in the shape of a hat, but it was a useful reminder.

They dealt with the white-hat information quickly by referring to the notes that had been circulated. No one raised anything else. Perhaps they were more interested in matters covered by the other hats.

Next was the red hat, about emotions. Pav fished a red pen out of his pocket and put it in the middle of the table. Francine could see that everyone seemed eager to speak. She gestured to Sarora.

Sarora took a little while to start. "This project ... this investigation ... it brings up awkward feelings, it reminds me of the treatment of refugees, and that's upsetting even though I should be used to it. But learning about frameworks, about the ways that we think about the world, ... it's sort of calming. It's like looking at the issues from a distance, from a height. It is ... I feel thankful to all of you, to everyone involved, for helping. Thank you." Sarora looked like she was surprised at herself being able to articulate these emotions.

Francine looked towards Roberto, nodded and raised her eyebrows. He took the cue. “Thanks, Sarora, what you said, it clicks with me. Climate ... it’s tough emotionally. The problem is so big, and everything we do, it’s never enough. It can be depressing, thinking about the future. So I like trying to learn from researchers, from Bramsen’s article and others. There’s a sense of hope, you know, like there’s answers out there if only we could figure them out. Back to the daily grind, when I’m down ... you probably know I’m usually positive, but not always ... well, like Sarora said, thinking of research, it’s sort of calming.”

Francine next looked to Sarah, who immediately launched in. “I’m angry. There’s so much wrong with the uni. Look, I’m sorry about before. We — that’s Pav and me — just heard about a new partnership with a big company. It’s obscene. Is there any hope? Maybe this project hasn’t got a chance and ...”

Francine briskly and smoothly interrupted, catching Sarah’s attention. “Sarah, it’s the red hat. Just your feelings for now. You can save your judgements for later.”

“Sorry, sorry again. I just get so frustrated with the uni. That’s really all I can think of. I’m angry, but not about the project. Can that be enough for now?”

Francine said, “Of course,” and Roberto added, “Thanks, Sarah. I feel your pain.”

Pav now took his turn. “Like Sarah, I am angry about the university. But about the project, I feel — I’m not sure, maybe satisfaction. Roberto and I had such a good discussion, I feel only the positive. Maybe that is not for the *red hat*.”

“That’s fine, Pav. You’ve told us your feelings. Now it’s my turn. What do I feel? I guess it’s nervousness. Is it going to make any difference? I’m nervous that I could be wasting all of our time.” Francine paused, but no one commented, and she continued. “I also feel really thankful to be here with you, my friends.”

There was murmuring of sympathy around the table. Francine now switched her voice from the personal to directive. “Thank you all for your red-hat comments. Now ...”

Just then, Riko appeared with their meals. It was good timing. Had she been listening? That wouldn’t make sense, because the food would go cold. Anyway, they tucked into the dishes, making small talk, all knowing they would continue afterwards, on the next hat.

Finally, it was time to recommence their discussion, and Francine nominated the black hat. She put her glasses on the table, with their black frames signifying the black hat, and again invited Sarora to go first.

“This is concerning what’s negative about the project, isn’t it so?” Francine nodded. “I see one problem. We might be looking for answers in the wrong place. No offence to you, Sarah and Pav.” They smiled and gestured to go ahead. “I see another problem, maybe a bigger one. Maybe answers we find are misguided, maybe they don’t help us but lead us astray. Is that ... is that enough?”

Francine thought Sarora had pinpointed crucial problems, and gave her a thumbs-up. Next she looked to Roberto.

“Hey, great, Sarora. Great points. I can think of another one. Even if there’s some good stuff in all this

academic writing, maybe it's gonna be too hard for most of us to figure it out, you know, to use it for our purposes. But ...” He stopped, realising he was about to introduce a positive. “That’s all for the black hat.” This was with a big grin. Roberto was presenting a negative but it didn’t seem to bother him.

Sarah saw it was now her turn. “Well, Pav and I already vented over our frustration with the university. Sarora, Roberto, thanks for your sensible, insightful points. What can I say, from the inside of the beast? A problem with this project is that there’s so much academic work that isn’t ever going to be useful to you.” She was using “you” to refer to activists.

“It’s like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Goodness knows, there are some useful ideas, but how to find them? Pav, you might have some suggestions.” Sarah looked at the table, the black-framed glasses sitting there, and said, “Actually, you might have some other problems to tell us.”

Pav was ready. “Thank you. This topic interests me greatly. There might be opportunities but the obstacles are ... they are the problem. Can we think of the body of knowledge as a house?” He used his outstretched hands to outline a shape.

“Now, we want to use some of this knowledge. But first we have to see into the house, through one of the windows. Each window is a different perspective, like militarism or Marxism. The trouble is that the militarism window allows you to see most of the house, but the activism window is smudged and gives a limited view. Yes? It’s not helpful to use the militarism window because

it only helps militarists. We are stuck with our smudged window. Maybe it is only a view of the toilet.” Pav said all this in a deadpan way, but everyone burst out laughing.

Francine had been taking notes, as agreed, without attaching ideas to names. She jested, “Should I call that the toilet trap?”

After the laughter subsided, Francine took her turn. “All those black-hat thoughts, thank you, you’ve covered nearly everything I had thought of along the way. I have just one other idea, which has worried me. What if, by looking at academic work to find useful things, we’re missing some *other* source of ideas? Well, we’re not going to ignore our own experience, no fear, but some other source outside the activist scene. I don’t know. Religion? Sports? Plumbing? Maybe academics are the most promising area, but what if they’re not?”

On that note, they took a short pause. It was time for dessert and small talk. Even though they had just articulated negatives about the project, somehow that cleared the air, made things seem better. It was like telling someone about your worst fears, and making them less fearful because they were out in the open.

Next was the yellow hat, which signified optimism. Pav was able to extract a yellow highlighter from his backpack and put it in the centre of the table. They were used to the sequence of commenting: all eyes turned to Sarora.

“What really gives me hope is to be with all of you on this search. It gives me hope that we can learn together. Some of our challenges seem so hard. That’s all I want to say. Thank you, Francine.”

It was Roberto's turn. "Like Sarora said, it's great to be part of this. It's so easy to get caught up in day-to-day campaigning, so being pulled out to think we might learn how to do better, that's super encouraging. I don't know whether we're going to find anything but, hey, we gotta try. That's what excites me about being here." He gave a double thumbs up, and everyone smiled. Pav said, "Right on, Roberto." The yellow hat was contagious.

Sarah was reflective. "I have to say, initially I was both sceptical and committed. There's so much wrong with ..." Sarah noticed Francine shaking her head, while smiling. "Whoops, no more black hat. Well, you've reminded me about the importance of activism, of campaigning, and maybe there is something activists can learn from scholarship, but maybe there's more that scholars can learn from activists. It's the interaction, mutual learning, that gives me hope."

Pav took a little while to take his turn. "I've known Francine for a little while. Then I met Roberto. And now Sarora. It's encouraging to see people outside the university being such eager learners. What gives me hope is that you can develop the capacity to separate valuable ideas from the rest, because I don't think most professors have any idea about how to do that. Sorry, that's a black-hat comment, so let me think. Like Sarah said, I think we can learn ... we can learn from how activists learn."

Francine finished taking notes before taking her turn. "My greatest hope is that more activists and more academics can connect, can overcome their mutual ... I was about to say disdain, but maybe non-interest is closer. The optimistic part of me imagines that if we can do this here,



others can too, and they will have different, differently valuable ways forward. I'd better stop now, otherwise I'll revert to the black hat." Francine wrote a note about her own comment. Strangely, commenting about positives had a dampening effect on the atmosphere. They had each expressed positives, but weren't able to voice their doubts at the same time.

Roberto, noting the silence, said, "Francine, can you explain the final hat? Blue, right?"

"Right, Roberto. It's meant to be about process. Sort of how we set about our thinking. I'm not quite sure what it means here. Anyone have any ideas?"

Sarah was about to say something when she noticed Pav gesturing towards Sarora. And Sarora had an idea. "It was our process to go through the thinking hats one by one, and each time we had the same sequence, no?" She looked expectantly at Roberto to take over.

"Right, Sarora. You nailed it in one. This is my first time with the hats, but it reminds me of a technique our group sometimes uses to slow down the conversation, so people don't keep interrupting each other. Before you say something, you have to summarise what the previous person said, to their satisfaction. It really makes everyone listen. The hats ... they're different, but they ... taking turns did something similar."

Sarah took her cue. "I really wish we'd do something like this, like the hats or the summary rule, in our meeting on campus, or online."

Pav looked at Francine and said, "My thinking about process, about the blue hat, was different. Okay?" After seeing Francine nod, he continued. "One process, as I

understand it, is what Francine has been organising from the start. I've been involved with just one component, with Roberto, but from the notes you circulated, it seems like you're systematically assessing how — and maybe *whether* — activists can learn something from academics." Pav looked again at Francine to make sure he was on track. "Your process is the one Francine designed, dividing the task into components, assigning them to individuals, and reporting back. Right?"

Francine smiled appreciatively. "Right, but I'd ... say it ... well, I like to think that our process was cooperative, rather than me 'assigning tasks'."

Roberto came to the rescue. "It's okay, Francine. You were the brains behind this project, the inspiration, and we all went along. I was keen, for sure."

Francine: "But I'd rather ..."

Sarora put her hand up, and Francine paused and gave her the go-ahead. "Francine got to know us. She was our mentor and ally. That was her process, no? She builds relations with us. After that, we like to help her in this."

Roberto: "Beautiful. I couldn't say it any better." Pav was smiling and Sarah mimed applauding.

At this point, Francine was overwhelmed. It took her a little while to regain her bearings. "It's hard for me to comment just now. Could someone summarise — the blue hat?"

Sarah, after looking to see if anyone else would answer, responded. "We seem to have two blue-hat sorts of comments. One is about our meeting tonight, which I think is great. Sorry, that's the red hat, or is it yellow? Anyway,

the other thing is the process of your project, Francine, and I'm so pleased that you brought me in."

Roberto immediately responded, turning the attention to Sarah and easing the pressure on Francine. "It seems to me that you jumped in. What a story about academic life!"

"You know I'm only partly the Sarah in the story, of course."

"Which parts exactly?"

"Can you guess?" Sarah enjoyed herself while teasing Roberto and Sarora — and Francine to a lesser extent — about how much her fictional Sarah was like the real one. It was a fun time for the whole group, a relief from their serious task. But it didn't continue. Roberto asked about something else.

"Ya know, we're getting on so well. I've a question, but first, remember Ron?" Sarah and Pav looked puzzled. "Anyway, he was worried about things we say gettin' out. This is the same."

He had their full attention. "In my climate group, and a couple of others I know 'bout, we've got problems, hassles between members, that really hold us back. It can get horrible. I thought global heating was a big challenge, but getting a group to operate well, like a well-tuned engine or something, that's a biggie too!"

Sarora immediately chimed in. "We have problems, too. Too many. It's a gap in what we know, yes?"

Roberto gave Sarora a knowing look. "Everybody knows about it but no one wants to say much about it. It might hurt the cause."

Sarora again chimed in. “Yes. But bad relations in our groups also hurt the cause, because we lose good members.”

Roberto felt in tune with Sarora, and continued. “Here’s what I want to know. How come we can sit here and talk about such important stuff and get along so well?”

There was a brief moment of silence with this question hanging in the air, until Sarah commented, “University meetings aren’t all that different. And when people get fed up, it’s not so easy to drop out; it means getting another job.”

Pav finished her thought. “Some do. It’s that bad.” Turning his gaze, he said, “Francine, what’s your secret?”

Francine saw all eyes on her, as if she were responsible for everything. She chose her words carefully. “In my experience, things go better when we’re not competing for anything, even status. So it helps that none of us here are in the same group. Are we?” She looked at Sarah and then Pav.

Sarah laughed. “It might have been a problem. Pav and I are friends.” She paused and winked at Pav. “And we’re in different departments, which helps a lot.” Pav laughed.

Sarora, though, continued in a serious vein. “Our group is all volunteers, and we have different lives, so why can’t we get along better? Is competition, for status, is it so powerful?”

Roberto: “I think it is, ’cause some people who come along, they’ve got lots of baggage. They need help, maybe no one else can help, so they come along to a climate group and cause havoc. I’m so ...”

Francine came to the rescue. “Roberto and Sarora, you’ve identified another area of ignorance. Do you think maybe we could investigate it? And maybe Sarah and Pav, maybe you can help.”

They talked about this, and Francine wrote down some notes for future use. She remembered, most of all, a comment by Sarora. “Maybe to understand what we don’t know, including the most sensitive things, we have to trust each other. And we have to trust ourselves.”

## 9

# Hearing updates

Betty woke up. She had been dreaming, and at first wasn't sure where she was. She realised she was lying in bed, on her back, and someone was holding her right hand.

“Betty?”

Betty recognised Francine's voice. Why was she here? She opened her eyes and saw Francine with a concerned look on her face.

“The staff told me you were feeling poorly and might want a visitor.”

“You're such a dear, Francine, to care and take the time.”

“Nonsense. And I've brought some news. I thought you might like to hear ...”

Francine was unsure about this, but thought Betty would appreciate hearing about the others. After all, her diary had been what had kept her going, and the project was what linked them all together.

“Oh, I hope you'll tell me about Winnie. And about Roberto. And ...”

“Very well.” Francine kept holding Betty's hand, now in both of her own. In Betty's room, with the door closed, it was quiet, with muffled sounds of activity in other rooms and occasionally someone going by in the corridor. Francine didn't need to raise her voice. She decided to put a positive spin on her news.

"Let me start with Roberto."

"Such a well-spoken young man. And so tall."

"You remember that he's active in the climate movement. He had a meeting with a professor to learn how to tackle an academic article. Did I tell you about that?"

"I don't think so, dear. It doesn't matter. Tell me anyhow. It's so nice to hear your voice." Betty seemed to be paying attention but sometimes faded out.

"Roberto and the professor, whose name is Pav, hit it off, and Roberto decided to approach him to be a sort of supervisor or mentor. But get this. Roberto didn't want to enrol as a student, but to be outside the formal system. And Pav agreed! Actually, I think they are working together, collaborating. Do you want to know ...?"

"That's very nice. And what about ...?" Francine realised that Betty could take in only a limited amount of news, and so pressed on.

"Sarora ..."

"Such a nice young lady. So well presented. So well spoken and ..." Betty trailed off.

"I've seen Sarora really blossom. You might remember she was a bit reserved when you met her. Well, she still is, but she's more confident and — can I say it? — ambitious, for a good cause. She's taking a leadership role in the refugee community, and started a programme in her company to support refugees. She got a couple of executives on side to make it happen. I'm really hopeful that it might inspire others to do the same. She did it by ..."

"That's nice." Betty seemed to lose interest, or maybe the ability to follow all this new information.

"Let me tell you about Winnie." Betty perked up.

“Oh, do tell. She’s such a nice lady. I remember her office.”

Francine could tell that Betty was struggling to maintain attention, so was brief. “Winnie was inspired by that meeting. She saw that she had the experience to explain things for others like you, and she’s set about writing — no, actually, she’s doing podcasts.”

Betty suddenly became animated. “Can ya tell me about Ron? I ’member Ron.” Perhaps her memories were being triggered.

Francine paused. She thought to herself, it doesn’t matter, I think it’s safe. Betty may not take it all in, but I think she likes to hear me talking. And Francine began.

“Betty, Ron remembers you and asks after you. But he hasn’t been around, so what I have to say, it might surprise you.”

Betty feebly responded, “Go ahead, dear.”

“Ron ... well, let’s say he’s having an impact. Every now and then, I receive an email, from an untraceable source, with inside information, nothing secret, but about the thinking of the police command about protest. Ron is like an inside source.”

On hearing about Ron, Betty seemed to rally, opening her eyes more widely and gripping Francine’s hand.

“There’s something else. Since our dinner, when you met him, there’s a new blog, ‘Justice for all’, by an anonymous author. Here’s how I think he does it. He writes short items that tickle the interest of people in the criminal justice system, linked to ideas — radical ideas — about alternatives. It’s caused quite a stir, and there are some who don’t like it, who’ve sent their experts to ‘get him’. But he’s



clever. Everything he writes is on a one-time pad, not connected to the Internet, and then uploaded through an intermediary, in another country, who doesn't even know his identity. I think he sends thumb drives through the post, I'm not sure. Very hush hush! He even runs his text through a program to disguise his writing style."

Betty had closed her eyes, and Francine couldn't tell whether she was listening.

"Actually, the man you met, his name's not Ron. I met him at a protest in another city, when I was visiting, and we made a connection. He came here especially for our dinner. You might not have realised it, but he was excited to meet you and the others. He's good at what he does. It was ..."

Francine stopped. Betty's hand had just gone limp and her breathing was imperceptible. Her eyes were closed, for the last time.

# **Appendix 1**

## **Project notes**

*All edited by Francine*

### **Francine's notes 1**

***Activist ignorance: gaps in knowledge about how to make the world a better place***

- How to deal with opponents with degrees, who seem to have credibility
- How to choose the most effective action
- A guide for making choices between fixing problems (symptoms) and addressing causes
- How to get more people to have skills and motivation to help campaigners be more effective
- A framework for moving from theory (of a desirable alternative) to day-to-day practice
- Advice on documenting abuses, and behaving in different ways to gain insights into others' behaviour

### **Francine's notes 2**

***How to go about filling our knowledge gaps: some options***

- Ask friends
- Do research yourself (need to learn how)
- Talk to experts

To find out who's an expert, try Google Scholar (or ask someone).

- Look up scientific articles and read them ourselves

(a) Obtain them (b) understand them!

*Side issue — what about wrong knowledge? Discuss later*

### **Roberto's notes**

#### ***How to read an academic article***

- Read the title. Decide whether it's worth reading more.
- If so, read the abstract. It's the summary at the beginning (and don't worry about understanding every word).

Decide whether it's worth reading more.

- You can make more sense out of the article if you already know something about the topic.

- Know your purpose (in reading the article).

— Try to figure out the main idea in the article. Maybe more than one.

— Don't bother with details unless you're going to write or talk about it or the author, like a critical analysis.

### **Sarora's notes**

#### ***Learning about frameworks***

- Frameworks (theories) reflect power in society. But we can challenge the dominant ones.
- Some academic work on frameworks is useful, but it's hard to know.
- Ideas need to be tested (outside the university).
- Think about different frameworks from a broader perspective — a “meta” perspective.

### **Betty's notes**

#### ***How to get hold of academic articles***

- Enrol in a course. Students can use university databases.

- Use someone else's account. (Winnie says this isn't a good idea – why not?)
- Buy a copy. (It's too dear for me!)
- Try Academia.edu, ResearchGate.net and university repositories (what are they anyway?)
- Try Sci-Hub
- Write to the author (how exciting!).  
— Maybe use the article title in the subject line, to get their attention.  
— Write a convincing request. Sound like you're serious (don't laugh).

### **Francine's notes 3**

#### ***Useful skills for researchers***

##### *Not in any particular order*

1. Efficient reading: be able to go fast, depending on your purpose
2. It's worth spending time and effort to develop a skill that saves time and effort in the long run.
3. Writing is a form of thinking.
4. Take notes on what you read and hear (including significant conversations).
5. Develop a good filing system, suited to your needs, and take the time to file things as you go.
6. If you want to do something important, turn off your phone and other distractions.

## **Appendix 2:**

### **Sarah's list of features of academia**

- **Activism.** There's no encouragement in academia to join or support activist campaigns. Usually, it requires personal commitment, which sometimes hinders professional advancement.
- **Bureaucracy.** In many universities, there has been an increase in the power of administrators, with less decision-making power remaining with academics. Bureaucratic requirements are onerous in some areas: curriculum, teaching, research ethics, metrics.
- **Competition.** It is fierce for jobs, promotions, awards and status. This is especially important in research and in the higher echelons.
- **Conflicts of interest (COIs).** Having a close personal relationship with a research student being supervised is a COI. Receiving research funds from a corporation with a stake in the results is a COI. Many academics have COIs.
- **Disciplines.** Universities are organised according to disciplines like physics and philosophy, and professional associations are too. These provide the peer groups for many academics in both teaching and research.
- **Dissatisfaction.** The negative sides of academic life include administration, marking assignments, bureaucratic requirements, and internal politics.
- **Exploitation.** Some senior scientists take credit for the ideas and work of subordinates, family members, research

assistants, research students and undergraduates. Another aspect of exploitation is the wide use of adjuncts for teaching, without job security.

- Fraud and plagiarism are seen as ultimate sins, but other forms of misrepresentation and exploitation, and COIs, are treated as non-issues.
- Hypocrisy. Some academics don't live up to their lofty ideals, like Marxist administrators who exploit staff and feminists who sabotage other women.
- Intelligence. It's commonly believed that intelligence is needed to become a researcher, and brilliance to become a top researcher. There is a contrary view, drawing on research on expert performance, that the key is deliberate practice. From this perspective, "brilliance" is acquired. See the book *Peak* by Ericsson and Pool.
- Internal politics. This is much like any other workplace, though the methods used are peculiar to academic priorities. Petty harassment might involve assigning someone to undesirable classes, teaching hours, workloads, committees, research students. Or the converse: gaining preferential treatment in these and other areas.
- Knowledge frameworks. These are highly influential in directing academic interests. Paradigms constrain thinking. Many academics are cautious, conformist (within their milieu), mainstream outside their disciplines.
- Peer orientation. Peers are scholars working in the same field, or at the same university, typically at a fairly similar level of achievement. Academics look to peers for

validation of their worthiness. Usually, other comparisons are less important.

- Peer review. This is the honoured system for ensuring quality control in academic research (not so much in teaching). It has many shortcomings, and can be used to suppress dissent.
- Popularisation. In previous years, popularisation was looked down upon, as unscholarly. It still is in many circles.
- Recognition, within the “core group” and the institution, is often more important than money. (Recognition commonly leads to jobs and promotions, so it is linked to salary, but for many the quest for recognition is the primary motivator.)
- Research. In most places, research is more prestigious than teaching. Many academics try to limit the amount of their teaching. Only a few seek more. Good teaching is seldom the main road to tenure and promotion.
- Satisfaction. Academic life can be highly satisfying. Teaching involves helping students, and the interaction with questioning minds can be gratifying. Research involves challenges that can be adjusted to one's capabilities, a wonderful activity for entering the flow state. Many PhD students want to become full-time researchers because of this. Interacting with colleagues can be rewarding — sometimes. It can also lead to annoyance, envy, resentment and trauma.

- Scholarly productivity. It is modest, with a median of one paper per year (when divided by the number of authors) per academic.
- Snobbery. Many academics feel superior to those without degrees and publications. In some places, this is countered by anti-intellectualism. Within academia, members of some disciplines — including maths, physics, sciences, economics, psychology — feel superior in intellect and accomplishment to those in disciplines like history and sociology.
- Social commitments. Many academics are committed, concerned, sympathetic to causes. Few participate in activist groups. More see their contribution as through teaching. Some organise as academics.
- Social impact. University administrations increasingly emphasise social impact, which often means publicity for scholarly work.
- Standards. High standards in some aspects of academic life coexist with institutionalised corruption. High standards prevail in the scholarship side of publishing. Corruption comes from COIs and exploitation.
- Status. This comes from appointments, publications, research grants, promotions and awards. Note that these are all extrinsic motivations.
- Teaching. Few academics have any training in teaching. To become an academic teacher, the most important prerequisite is research.
- Training. It is required and it's lengthy, usually an undergraduate degree and a PhD for those who acquire



permanent jobs. This leads to commitment to implicit principles. See Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*.

- Variation. There is considerable variation within and between universities. Some individuals and units are dynamic and productive; some are just marking time or consumed in petty quarrels; for many, it's just a job.

**Note** For every one of these generalisations, there are many exceptions.

## Author's note

My interest in the connections between academia and activism, between theory and action, goes back a long way. Here are a few points of interest in my journey.

In 1976, I moved to Canberra to take my first full-time job, at the Australian National University. I joined the local Friends of the Earth group and became heavily involved in its main campaign, which was against uranium mining and nuclear power. I had just finished my PhD in theoretical physics at the University of Sydney but knew my physics training gave me little insight into nuclear power issues, which were mainly about risks, politics, ethics and economics, except to know that nuclear expertise should not give any special credibility in the nuclear debate.

My paid job was in applied mathematics, and in my spare time I was an anti-nuclear activist. In the late 1970s, I discovered some sociological studies of the anti-nuclear-power movement. They were disappointing because they didn't say anything we didn't already know. This might have been the beginning of my interest in what activists can learn from academic work — and how most academic work is irrelevant to activists.

The two most prominent proponents of nuclear power in Australia at the time were Sir Philip Baxter, a nuclear engineer, and Sir Ernest Titterton, a nuclear physicist. I decided to write a detailed critique of their views, to provide a useful resource for anti-nuclear activists. I discovered that publishing my critique in an academic journal was a non-

starter, so I found a publisher for it to come out as a booklet. This was another experience in the interface between scholarship and campaigning.

A decade later, I obtained a tenurable job at the University of Wollongong, in the social studies of science and technology. Separately from my academic work, I interviewed several activists, asking them about what, if anything, they had learned from academic work. The usual answer was nothing.

On another occasion, I attended a gathering of nonviolent activists, and took the opportunity to ask each of them a question. If there were some researchers willing to do their bidding, what would they ask them to find out? Some of their questions already had been studied and answered, while others were impossibly grand. I learned that few activists have a good idea of what academic work has to offer, and they don't necessarily know what research insights would be useful to them.

Later, I became heavily involved in Whistleblowers Australia, a support group, most of whose members are whistleblowers, and over the years talked with hundreds of them. There's a large amount of research about whistleblowing, but hardly any of it is of practical use to whistleblowers. It is *about* whistleblowing, not anything that a whistleblower would find useful to read. Again, the disjunction between research and practice seemed to me to be a problem.

After formally retiring from my academic job in 2016, I returned to the long-standing challenge of theory and action, of research relevant to activism. My idea was to write down what I had learned about academia over decades

of study into higher education, dissent and organisational dynamics, and somehow convey it to campaigners. I wrote down a list of features of academia, but it seemed dry and lifeless, and a fictional portrayal was more vivid and fun. This became the chapter “Sarah’s day” and the list of features became Appendix 2. But mixing “Sarah’s day” with commentary on theory and action seemed awkward, and I decided to turn it all into a story.

Some readers have told me there should be more tension and conflict. After all, most activist groups encounter serious interpersonal clashes. However, I’ve been fortunate in my activist experience, spending years in mostly harmonious activity.

In thinking of Francine’s quest, I was influenced by the community research projects that a few of us carried out in the group Schweik Action Wollongong. The challenge is to learn how to do better. It’s an experimental process, and there is no end to the quest.

There are many fabulous activists who are highly knowledgeable, well-read and deep thinkers. They know how to take scholarly findings and make them relevant. I also know impressive academics making sustained efforts to use their knowledge and skills to assist campaigners. There is so much good work that it’s impossible to keep up with it all.

But there is a problem, or rather two problems. The organisational and career imperatives in academic life encourage researchers to write for each other, and the organisational and peer pressures influencing activists encourage a focus on here-and-now campaigning, with little energy remaining for reflection, analysis and long-

term planning and capacity-building. There is a long way to go to bridge the two worlds. Francine represents all those who are trying to close the gap.

I have had the good fortune of receiving valuable feedback about plans for *Francine's Quest* and on draft text. Thanks to Paula Arvela, Steven Bartlett, Anu Bissoonauth-Bedford, Lea Bonasera, Isabel Bramsen, Sharon Callaghan, Jungmin Choi, Susan Engel, Nicky Evans, Kelly Gates, Jo Greenland, Emily Herrington, Anneleis Humphries, Anita Johnson, Tim Johnson-Newell, Olga Kuchinskaya, Julia LeMonde, Alison Moore, Julia Nennstiel, Daniel Petz, Yasmin Rittau, Dalilah Shemia-Goeke, Majken Sørensen, Ian Watson and Tom Weber. What a privilege and pleasure it is to be connected with so many insightful and helpful activists and academics.

Francine is a nurse, but her passion is helping activists be more effective. She decides to find out what activists can learn from academic work — maybe nothing! How better to do this than by recruiting some of her activist friends to join the project? Francine and her co-investigators explore how to obtain and understand scholarly articles and what it means to think theoretically, and get some insight into what it's like to be an academic. While making some progress in their quest, each one is inspired in a personal way.

This is a fictional story for activists and potential activists so they can better understand what's going on in the academic world and figure out what, if anything, they might be able to learn from it.

