

HALF NELSON

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Like any other university, Harvard sucks. What makes it a great university is that it sucks harder than most.

Back in the eighties, a Harvard fund-raiser told the newspapers how he planned to meet his five-billion-dollar goal. “You can’t get this kind of money from alumni mailings,” he said. “You have to concentrate on a couple of hundred individuals, most of them in the greater New York area.” The giant sucking noise coming out of Cambridge was about to get deafening, down there in the greater New York area.

By comparison what Washington hears from Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government sounds more like a long, gentle kiss. Or usually it does, except sometimes the kiss gets all wet and slobbery. For instance when the school gave a public service medal to Reagan’s unindicted consigliere, Ed Meese.

Mostly, though, the JFK School’s courtship is more dignified. The school provides a sheltered environment for politicians temporarily sidelined by the voters. It helps out promising young wonks and pols who might someday reach the level where they could swing a government grant this way or that. It cycles professors in and out of Washington. It sponsors books and reports and studies and seminars and symposiums and forums.

And sometimes the speakers at the forums are interesting.

So sometimes I go to hear them.

Most times I go alone, but this particular night I had a handsome woman next to me. She was Hope Edwards, my long-time and long-distance lover since the days when both of us were working to keep Reagan out of the White House by keeping Carter in it.

Ever since that nasty and disastrous 1980 campaign, Hope and I had helped each other through the nights and the days as often as we could. This meant whenever she was able to get up to Cambridge or I was able to get down to Washington, where she lived with her lawyer husband and their three kids.

This time Hope had come up to Cambridge with one of the speakers at tonight's forum, Robert Rackleff. He was on the speaker's platform, a tall man all long bones and angles who looked to be in his thirties until you looked a little closer. Gray had started to mix in with the fine blond hair that drifted down over his forehead, and the beginnings of lines showed around his mouth and eyes.

"What kind of guy is he?" I asked Hope.

"Hard to talk about Robert without sounding like some airhead groupie," Hope said. "What the hell, though. I still think he's sort of a saint."

"Pretty strong language."

"You'll see for yourself, after," Hope said. After the show we were going out to eat a late dinner with Rackleff, so he could tell me about a nasty problem he had.

The crowd quieted down as a JFK School professor took the mike and set to work introducing and introducing and introducing the panelists. By the time the professor was done, we were ready for anything except more of him.

The first of the panelists to do his five-minute opener was a guy named Don Frith, who was the director of public affairs for an industry lobby called the Council on Forest Rehabilitation. He seemed to be saying that the road to responsible rehabilitation begins with cutting all the trees down. Made sense, the way he told it.

Frith was diffident, decent, politely accommodating or pleasantly firm as required, modestly self-assured, well-informed, responsible, rational, reasonable, intelligent, plausible, sincere, serious and yet with just a touch of self-deprecating humor. The kind of smooth and soothing man who does most of the real damage in Washington.

He was doing as well as any card-carrying clear-cutter could, considering that his audience was mostly eco-freaks, grad students with backpacks, undergrads with book bags, young mothers with long, straight hair and babies in slings, and professors in khakis or corduroy. They spluttered and muttered softly as he talked, and scribbled angry questions for the Q and A period.

The JFK School puts on its forums in a space that holds cafeteria tables during the day. There's only room on the ground floor for a hundred or so folding chairs, which means that the rest of the crowd has to settle for the peanut galleries overhead. The latest arrivals of all are stuck with a view of the speakers' heads from the rear, looking down from staircases and balconies on the second and third floors. Normally I would have been up there in the back myself. But I was with Hope, who was with one of the speakers, and so we had big-shot reserved seats over to one side of the low platform where the panel sat.

Mr. Frith finished with fifteen seconds of his five minutes to spare. I amuse myself by timing these things, a holdover from my days on political campaigns.

"Guy's pretty good," I whispered when the lobbyist sat down to applause that ran from polite to nonexistent.

"Unfortunately he is," Hope said. "Those are the nutcutters I have to put with all the time in Washington."

"I bet they speak just as highly about you."

Hope ran the Washington office of the American Civil Liberties Union, which at the moment was involved in protecting the First Amendment rights of six members of Rackleff's environmental movement, Earth Everlasting. The ACLU's argument was that ringing a threatened redwood tree with handcuffed greenies was an exercise free speech.

The rehabilitators of the forest figured it was criminal trespass.

Hope was up in Cambridge partly because Robert Rackleff's group was a client, but mostly, in fact, to visit me. Her husband, Martin, was a late-blooming homosexual who had fathered three children before coming to grips with his nature. After the birth of the youngest he finally told Hope his secret, but otherwise he stayed in the closet for the sake of the kids.

For the same reason, Hope and I stayed in our own version of the closet. Until recently we had pretended to Martin that Hope and I were just friends. In those days Hope wouldn't have come up to Cambridge on what was essentially a personal trip, since she wasn't directly involved in the tree-hugging case. She would have waited for a legitimate office reason, and stayed at the Charles Hotel on the expense account.

She still could have stayed at the Charles, since she approved her own expense accounts. John Sununu would have done it in a shot. Not being Sununu, she was paying her own way. And not being in the closet anymore, so to speak, she was staying with me. There were turning out to be advantages in the three of us coming clean with each other. We should have done it long ago.

“ . . . whom I am sure will be as refreshingly outspoken with us as he was before the President's timber commission,” the moderator was saying. “Let us welcome the chairman and chief executive officer of the Dixie-Cascade Corporation, Hap Overholser.”

Overholser grabbed the mike firmly by the neck. His hand was heavy and thick and square, a meat hammer covered with reddish fur. Overholser had been a defensive lineman for Tulane back in the '70s. Now *Forbes* magazine listed his personal wealth at between \$500 and \$750 million. He had got his hands on all that—the word “earned” seems wrong—by floating junk bonds to take the company over. To pay off the bonds he was currently taking his best shot at scalping the states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.

Overholser waited for the polite applause that no doubt came after he was introduced at things like stockholder meetings. But it had just barely come for the forest rehabilitation guy, and it didn't come for Overholser at all. It kept on not coming for an embarrassing length of time. This was Cambridge, where the most popular disk jockey is still Robert J. Lurtsema and the municipal bird is the spotted owl.

Hap Overholser wasn't bothered a bit. It wasn't the first time he had faced a hostile line. He let the embarrassment grow while he smiled and settled his grip tighter on the microphone, as if he were squeezing the whole scruffy bunch of us into submission

"You want to know what this entire so-called controversy is all about?" he said at last into the mike, so close and loud that feedback distorted his words. "The spotted owl, like they want you to think? Why hail no! This whole thing is purely and simply about the federal government trampling all over the rights of the private individual."

"Give me a break," I whispered to Hope.

"Shut up and listen, Bethany. Guys like him built America."

Overholser wore one of those Italian suits that look like a hundred dollars even though they actually cost twenty times that much. Sticking out from the sharp Italian trousers were Wellington boots made of some kind of snakeskin. Possibly python. Nice-looking boots, if you're an asshole.

His five-minute opener ran nearly ten minutes. It was rambling stuff, complaining and boastful by turns, about how Big Government and its faithful sidekick, Big Media, were keeping he-men like himself from solving America's problems. A microphone in the locker room of any restricted country club in America would have picked up the same mixture of snarls and whines. I tuned out.

"John Wayne used to wear cowboy boots everywhere," I whispered to Hope.

She nodded and I went on. "He was six-foot-four but he wore four-inch lifts anyway."

"What is this obsession with John Wayne's boots?" Hope whispered back.

"This Overholser is built a lot like him," I said. "Wears boots, too. Did you know there's a John Wayne International Airport in Orange County, California?"

"Everybody knows that."

"Yeah, but don't you find it amazing?"

"In Orange County? No."

"I guess it isn't, come to think of it. Did you know John Wayne got a draft deferment in World War II when he was 34? Did you know his maiden name was Marion Morrison?"

"Go pester somebody else, Bethany. Leave me alone with my dreams."

I checked the other shoes under the panel's table. The moderator wore those clunky Rockports with the thick rubber soles. The brown leather uppers were unpolished but cared-for. Probably dressed with the brand of waterproof dubbing rated best-buy in Consumer's Reports. The smooth lobbyist wore black, gleaming loafers. Rackleff wore sneakers that were just a little off-white, the color they call natural in the catalogs.

Rackleff's total fashion statement was hard to make out. Sixties hippy? Don Johnson? His thick wool hiking socks were the color of oatmeal. His loose canvas pants looked like the fabric that artists paint on. His shirt was Guatemalan, those heavy, nubby cotton things that look so comfortable but always turn out to be too short or too narrow through the shoulders or both. Rackleff wore it buttoned to the neck with no tie, which used to be the sign of the dork but is now high fashion if you can believe the ads. On the other hand the guys in the ads all seem to be dorks, so maybe nothing has changed.

Over the shirt Rackleff wore what Brooks Brothers calls a sack coat. Doctors wear practically the same type of cotton jacket and so do supermarket clerks, although the clerk

version comes in blue or green or red. Rackleff's jacket was a light tan, only a few shades darker than white. The shirt and pants weren't quite the same color, but came close. The effect of his outfit wasn't blinding like Michael Jackson or ice-cream-colored like Gatsby or dove-gray like Adolphe Menjou, but just a general paleness.

"I should point out," the moderator said, "that this evening's forum was not planned as a two-on-one drill, but our other representative from the environmental movement unfortunately will not be present. I have just received word that Harrison Deets of the Nature Conservancy has been unavoidably delayed in St. Louis by nature, in the form of an apparently impenetrable line of thunderstorms."

He paused for the imitation of laughter that professors extort from their classes. He got it. This was an audience trained in its duty by decades of academic wit.

"I'm sure our last panelist is up to the challenge, however. And so let me present without further ado one of the most unusual and charismatic leaders of the environmental movement, Robert Rackleff of Earth Everlasting."

What followed was not the polite application of palms to one another that the lobbyist had drawn and Overholser had not. It was immediate, spontaneous, and enthusiastic. A few people even got to their feet briefly, before figuring it was uncool and sitting down again. Till recently I had been only vaguely aware of Rackleff's existence, but plainly he was a major hero to the Birkenstock crowd.

Rackleff waited till the applause was over. In the silence that followed, he let his eyes wander over the audience in front of him, and up to the balconies. He looked over his shoulder, first one way and then the other, at the late-comers stacked up behind him. The only expression on his face was a vague pleasantness, just short of a smile. Then he turned back to the mike.

"Up to the challenge," he said. He seemed to be talking to himself. "Funny word, isn't it, challenge? Climbing Everest. First on the moon. Aceing a test. Always an idea of

dominance, isn't there? Climbing over things. Pushing things out of your way. Or people, I guess. Things or people. Both, maybe.

"It's not a comfortable word for me. I'm more comfortable with words like flow or sway. Harmony. Cycle, rhythm, words like that. Easy words to get along with, those are the words I like.

"Well. Challenge. Does a rock challenge the stream, do you suppose? Does the stream feel challenged? How about the rock? The stream changes course a little for the rock, doesn't it? Runs over it or around it. The rock just sits there, but it changes shape over time. Gets round, smooth. Does it mind? Who won? Who lost? Was there even a game? The stream is still there. That's the important thing, the stream. That's the challenge. I imagine we all agree on that,"

Rackleff looked over at the smooth man, and said, "You agree, don't you, Mr. Frith?"

"Please," the lobbyist said. "Call me Don. Sure I agree. We may differ on means, but the challenge is certainly preserving that stream."

"You'd agree, too, I imagine," Rackleff said to the Dixie-Cascade man, and then paused for a second. "Wouldn't you, Mr. Overholser?"

Mr. Overholser didn't say call me Hap. He didn't say anything. He just stood there, chin up and out, with his jaw muscles locked.

Rackleff rippled right on, like that stream over the rock. "You'd agree with us that the real challenge is the whole eco-system, wouldn't you, Mr. Overholser?"

"Don't think I'm going to help you," Mr. Overholser said. His face had turned red, as if his head was about to blow up. "Give your own speech."

Rackleff smiled mildly, and did so.

It was a curious speech, all about being gentle. Gentle with the land, gentle with the plants and creatures on it, gentle with each other. From just about anybody else, it

would have made me want to throw up, and not so gently. From this tall, pale man, it was moving.

Rackleff seemed to be transparent, so that you could watch his thoughts start in his heart and come out as words. A man like that couldn't lie. He would find the whole idea of a lie puzzling. Why would a person want to say a thing which wasn't so? Wasn't the purpose of words to search out the truth? And so you had to believe him, or at least believe in him.

The discussion followed Rackleff's talk. It went along the same lines as the opening statements. Frith was persuasive in a linear, lawyerly way. Rackleff hardly bothered to answer his arguments. He just went around and beyond them as if they didn't exist. The world he called up wasn't made of logic and right angles and straight lines; it was tumbles of clouds, swirls of light and colors, fluid and not fixed. His arguments were more theological than scientific—founded on love and faith, not skepticism and experiment. In Congress, Frith would have won. In Cambridge, it was Rackleff hands down.

The clear loser was Overholser, not that he seemed to care. Plainly he figured he could hire and fire the whole crowd, bag and backpack. If they were so smart, why weren't they rich? He kept saying things like, "A lot of you are going to be looking for jobs pretty soon, and just where do you think they're going to be coming from? You think you're all going to work for the Sierra Club?"

Overholser just didn't get it. To this crowd, the Sierra Club was a bunch of opportunists who had sold out to the polluters long ago.

To most of the crowd, anyway. The person who had been waiting longest at the nearest microphone to the platform looked like any other student, but he turned out to be a Harvard Business School android in grad student drag. "My name is Vernon Cogswell, and I'm a second-year student at the business school," he enunciated clearly, for the benefit of anyone out there who might want to hire him after graduation. "My question is directed at Mr.

Overholser. Sir, we have heard a good deal about gentleness from Mr. Rackleff. Would you tell us, from your experience as a successful businessman, whether it is possible in today's internationally competitive marketplace to create jobs and meet a payroll by being gentle?"

"I'd be out of business in six months," Overholser said. "Then ten thousand jobs would go right down the tubes. Maybe he knows how to do it. I'd give a lot to know where he gets the money to meet his own payroll, matter of fact. Why don't you ask him?"

"Mr. Rackleff?" asked the business school guy.

"Let me think how to answer," Rackleff said. "... I guess the short answer is that I don't really have to meet much of a payroll. It's harder for Mr. Overholser, I guess. Mr. Overholser's problem is to get people to do something every day that they don't really want to do. Most of my people are volunteers.

"To answer this gentleman's question, though, I don't really know whether you could be gentle and meet a large payroll. There's something kind of non-gentle in the whole idea of payrolls, isn't there? Isn't money a form of force, in a way? Aren't you using it, really, to make people do something for you that they wouldn't do otherwise? I don't know. It's a tough question."

"You damned straight it's tough," Overholser said, facing the B-school student. "That's why he can't answer it. Why don't you ask him how he pays the rent on his office, son?"

"Mr. Rackleff?" said young Vernon Cogswell, all crisp and challenging. Vernon Cogswell was just loving it, running macho messages for a real Fortune 500 CEO.

"We don't really have much of an office," Rackleff said. "Just an answering service and a bunch of those plastic milk crates in the back of my truck, to keep papers and records in. Now and then I sleep in the truck, too, but mostly I stay with supporters. If they don't have an extra bed, I have a folding cot I use. So we don't have much of a budget, really. Some, but not much. We have a few people who

work full-time out of their homes for minimum wages, because you need to have some kind of an institutional memory besides just me. But you can do an amazing amount without much money. People are wonderful, they really are.”

Go for it, Vernon Cogswell, I thought. I waited for him to translate the question for his idol. Something like: “Well, Mr. Overholser, what do you say to that one? In your experience as a hard-driving, successful executive, are people really wonderful?”

Instead the moderator regained control by calling on someone at one of the other mikes. The rest of the forum was in standard form, with the panelists answering their questioners directly. The smooth guy was smooth, and the tough guy was tough, and the gentle guy was gentle.

At the end it was Rackleff once again who got the greatest ovation, this time a standing ovation.

“Hard to imagine the type of mind you’d have to have to want to kill a man like that, isn’t it?” Hope said when the applause had died down.

That was what I was there for. Rackleff had been getting death threats in the mail and I was supposed to advise him on what to do about them. I was supposed to know about death threats because during the early primaries in 1980 I had been the occasional pilot and the full-time body man for Teddy Kennedy.

In politics, the body man is the rememberer who stays next to the candidate at all times, whispering into the man’s ear everything he needs to know. Names of local politicians and journalists, details about the area’s history or problems, scheduling information, whatever. The body man knows where the nearest men’s room is, so the candidate can download his last three cups of coffee or change to a fresh shirt. He checks for spinach caught in the candidate’s teeth, a necktie off-center, shirt tails out, problem hair, whatever will look bad on camera. He makes signals to the candidate when the speech is running too long. He writes down the names of voters the candidate talks to, or promises

something to, so they can get a personal note later and of course go on the mailing list.

I was a body man in another sense, too. I wasn't a real bodyguard, but I was sort of an unofficial one. After years of working towards it I had finally won myself a spot on the 1980 Olympic wrestling squad, and damned if Carter hadn't boycotted the games. Carter's idea was to punish Brezhnev for being as stupid in Afghanistan as we had been in Vietnam. My idea was to punish Carter for flushing my years of effort down the toilet, in a useless PR gesture. Since I had already been training at the Hawkeye Wrestling Club in Iowa City, I signed on to help Teddy in the Iowa caucuses.

Later in the campaign I hung around a little with the secret service guys, which was touchy at first because they're as jealous of their turf as any other bureaucrat. But the wrestling thing helped. Those guys go through a few hours of half-assed hand-to-hand combat instruction, but it isn't much and it gets rusty fast. They were impressed by the Olympics thing, and they were glad to learn a few new control holds.

Another reason we got along was that most of the Secret Service agents didn't like Carter a whole lot more than I did at the time. Apparently Ford had been a much nicer guy to work for. So one way and another the agents and I wound up getting along pretty well. They learned a few things from me and I learned a few things from them.

One thing I learned is that anybody can kill anybody in public life, even a president, if the killer doesn't mind getting caught. No one, for example, had screened tonight's crowd at the JFK School in any way. You showed up early enough, you got in. If you wanted to kill a major environmental villain or a major environmental hero, there they both were, defenseless in the crowd.

"They're practically mobbing your guy," I said to Hope. "Maybe he is a saint."

"Some of them seem to think so, don't they? Look at the way that girl is gazing up at him."

“Or maybe he isn’t a total saint. That business about the volunteers was pretty cute. So was that Mister Frith and Mister Overholser stuff.”

“Cute how? Overholser just stepped into it.”

“Sure, but Rackleff put it there for him to step into. I’ve been to a lot of these forums. Unless the other guy has a title like judge or senator, you always call him by his first name. It’s a way of showing he doesn’t outrank you.”

“I don’t follow you,” Hope said. “Rackleff just asked first, to be polite. How is that one-upmanship?”

“He could have gone ahead and called the other guys by their first names without asking, which is what most panelists do. But instead he carried the game one step further. Frith was smart enough to duck, but Overholser wasn’t.”

“Duck what?”

“Duck looking like an asshole, the way Overholser did when he didn’t say, Call me Hap. From then on, Rackleff stuck it to him. Called him Mr. Overholser every chance he got.”

“Or maybe Robert never gave it a thought and was just being polite. Saints aren’t as devious as you, Bethany.”

“I doubt it. I bet there’s nobody as devious as a saint.”

