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TEA WITH MRS. MUSSOLINI

Any strike creates a lot of stress for its members, but it also creates a few stories that remind us how absurd life can really be. Here's one that gets passed around our graduate student bar from time to time. The week before we were due to take down the picket lines for the Christmas break, Hamilton police had approached and asked us if we could just pass out flyers that week instead of picket. Apparently there was an important Y2K conference at McMaster with many important brainy computer guys trying to solve a problem that, in the end, as we all know, just didn't exist. Feeling the Christmas spirit, we complied. After all, there shouldn't be too many picketers before Christmas, right?

Well, we miscalculated. Many of our members wanted to get in some last minute picketing before they went home for the holidays. It was quite a sight when I walked down Sterling street to the line (or lack thereof) in order to drop off more flyers. About twenty-five people were clustered around our firebarrels on the median between the entrance and exit roads to and from campus. Their umbrellas formed a colourful tent over their heads, as it was a cold, wet, misty day. Two people were passing out soggy flyers to cars that, for the most part, didn't stop to take them. I picked the other strike co-chair, Sara Tedford, out of the crowd and approached her for consultation.

"What on earth are we going to do with all these people?" I asked.

Looking around, Sara weighed the options and replied, "we could get them to flyer the neighbourhood".

"We did that last week, is there anything else?"

"How about taking them for tea?" she said, half-jokingly.

"Perfect. Let's go see if that rumour is true."

There certainly is no shortage of rumours on the picket lines, and this one was quite curious. About two weeks ago, Mrs. George, the wife of the president of McMaster University, invited some picketers who were on our other line at Cootes drive for some tea. At the time, I thought 'the nerve!' but now I really wanted to see if she was sincere in her offer.

Sara agreed to find out, so we gathered the picketers around us and explained the plan. Leaving a few people behind to pass out flyers to the cars, we were going to march across campus, pick up some more picketers on Cootes drive, find the president's residence (none of us had ever been there) and knock on the door for an impromptu afternoon tea party. Some decided to stay behind; it was a bit daring after all, but most thought that it was a fine idea.

So we set off with the group and found a few more people at the other line. Without much trouble, we found the road to the president's residence. There were twenty-one of us in total, and everyone's mood

seemed to be lifting despite the gray weather. In a way, it felt like we were going trick-or-treating, with the intention of playing a trick because we weren't expecting a treat.

Halfway down the road Sara turned to me and said, "Elizabeth, what if she lets us in?"

"Hmm, I guess we have tea."

The house was beautiful: red brick, surrounded by trees, but goodness! We just couldn't figure out which was the front door and which was the back because the house stood perpendicular to the road. So we all marched down the driveway to the second door, discovered that it probably wasn't the right one, backed up, then marched down the driveway to the other entrance. Asking the picketers to wait in the driveway, Sara and I went down the front walk and rapped on the heavy wooden door. A few seconds passed, and we gave each other a nervous look. Then the door swung open and a lovely, mid-thirtyish brunette woman looked at us hesitantly, but politely.

"Are--are you Mrs. George?" I stammered.

"Yes," she answered.

"Well, we heard from some other picketers that you extended an invitation for some tea. Since it's such an awful day, we were wondering if we could take you up on that offer," I said.

"If you're not too busy, that is" added Sara.

Without blinking, she peered past our shoulders out into the driveway where the rest of group were assembled and said, "Sure, come on in! Oh, and you can call me Allison."

Needless to say, we were all a bit stunned by this woman's hospitality. I think she, in turn, was a bit surprised by our numbers. So all twenty-one of us filed into the front hallway, wet, shaking our umbrellas and laughing a bit nervously. As if Sara and I had been there before, we took everyone's coats and hung them up in the basement. Allison offered to run anyone's wet clothing through the dryer if we wanted. Then some of us went into the kitchen to help her stir up the hot chocolate and tea, and others wandered about the main floor of the house looking at the art work hung on the walls, chatting with each other, and basically trying to adjust to the situation.

We were in the house of the man, who, the previous week, during our rally on the steps of the administration building, locked himself in his office and stationed an armed guard right outside the door. The very large man with a gun deterred Sara and I from inviting Peter George to speak at the rally of the striking teaching assistants. Now, we were sitting around the president's dining room table having tea with his wife.

Conversation became easier as the time progressed. We talked about our programs, the university community, and a little bit about picketing but nothing too specific about the strike itself. Allison, we learned, was a Unitarian minister, and this probably explained her spontaneous generosity. We drank hot chocolate, black tea and herbal tea, and ate those little mandarin oranges that you only see at Christmastime. Everybody, it seemed, was enjoying the surreal experience.

After about an hour, Sara and I looked around at the empty teacups and decided that it was probably time to go. We gathered the coats from the basement (which were nicely dry) and sorted out the many pairs of shoes piled up in the front hall. Everyone filed out and Sara and I lingered in the doorway a few moments to thank Allison for her hospitality.

"Anytime," she smiled, "but please no more today, I have a few errands to run".

Assuring her that there won't be any more impromptu visits today, Sara and I started down the front walk. As we left, Allison George bent down and retrieved a small stone kept inside her front door and placed it outside by the walk. Written on the stone was the word "Welcome."

Just great, I smiled to myself; maybe Peter George needs one of those outside his office.

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