“Best and Finals on Foghorn, two o’clock at ETA,” Grunwald said to Benton.

Benton fully understood the phrase “two o’clock,” but the rest of that statement buzzed past his ear then disappeared like sound of an angry June Bug. Grunwald had toddled off down the hall with that rocking walk that always made Benton fear he might pitch over at any moment. Benton wanted to get more information without revealing his massive ignorance about his new job, his new firm, the language and culture of this new industry he’d just entered, not to mention the great city itself. He hustled to fall in step beside Grunwald.

“Foghorn?” he asked.

“That’s the proposal to ETA on Trade Adjustment Assistance.” Benton remembered: all projects at the firm, even proposals for projects, had an internal codename, though the naming conventions were still obscure to Benton.

“I assume ‘Foghorn’ alludes to our ability to guide the client through the dark mists of policy evaluation,” he said.

“No, Foghorn refers to the project officer who reminds me of a giant rooster.” Benton had it now: Best and Final Offer negotiations with the Employment and Training Administration on the Foghorn proposal. “Down at DOL, right?” He tossed in the acronym for the Department of Labor just to show he too could speak the lingo.

“As a social scientist,” Grunwald said, “you should be able to infer the gravity of
this occasion just by observing how I’m dressed.” He stooped walking and faced Benton, arms held his arms wide, palms outward.

Benton laughed. “Good heavens, a tie!”

“Yeah, to win this contract I would even dress like you yuppy geeks.”

Not quite, Benton thought. He hadn’t seen a floral pattern like that since he and his brother had played get-along-little-doggie with his father’s ties.

“If we win Foghorn, you’ll be covered,” Grunwald said.

Ah yes, coverage, there was another new concept that Benton had abruptly encountered. His was not really a salaried job, it was explained to him on his first day, more like membership in a cooperative of self-employed professionals. To get paid he needed to help generate new projects, not just to pay his own salary, but that of several support staff as well. This had failed to come up during the recruitment interview. The obverse of Grunwald’s statement was obvious if unspoken: “If we lose Foghorn, you may not be here very long.”

“By the way,” Grunwald said, ”Greg Morris is coming down to negotiate with us.” He rolled his eyes.

“Oh.” That was all Benton could think to say about Greg Morris, the man who had hired him up at headquarters in Boston, the Executive Vice President, the person in charge of research operations, the second most senior official in the firm. Grunwald might feel free to roll his eyes after saying Morris' name, he had been with the firm since its founding, Benton was starting his second week.
At 12:45, Marta Wang, one of the other new economists, stuck her head into Benton’s office. “We’re going to meet before dinner at El Dorado; it’s a bar on K St. Do you need directions?”

“No, I’m riding with Charlie.”

“OK.” Marta’s voice fell almost to a whisper. “Hey, guess who I just saw in the lobby? Greg Morris.”

“Yikes,” Benton said, “then I guess I’d better get down to Tom’s office.” Benton wrapped up the remaining half of his chicken salad on baguette and brushed the crumbs off his white shirt and red-checked tie. How strange it felt to be dressed like this.

At five-minutes-to-one the three of them left the building: Greg Morris and Tom Grunwald, with Benton, the junior colleague, walking two steps behind. It was the day after Labor Day and the steamy DC summer was only grudgingly relaxing its grip on the city. On any other day-after-Labor-Day Benton would have been headed back to school, as a student, as a TA, as a research associate, as an assistant professor – one side of the desk or the other, it didn’t much matter. He had returned to school every day-after-Labor-Day since Nixon's first term. He had expected to return to school for the rest of his life. But tenure decisions can be unpredictable, and on this September afternoon he found himself descending the concrete shaft from Connecticut Avenue down to Van Ness Station. The shaft was so long and steep it would not have been surprised Benton to see grimy and exhausted coal minors with empty lunch boxes coming up the other escalator. Benton’s grandfather had mined for 30 years in the anthracite fields of Eastern Pennsylvania and had rejoiced mightily when his grandson earned a Ph.D. He died
shortly after.

Morris was in front followed by Grunwald and Benton.

“I don’t know why we have to leave this early,” Grunwald was saying, “We’re going to be cooling our heels at DOL for an hour.” Such overt criticism of Morris would have alarmed Benton had Morris been there, but the Executive VP had already marched far down the escalator, passing on the left any of the slowpokes just standing there riding. Slowpokes like Grunwald and Benton. Benton was wondering whether it would be politically prudent to follow Morris and walk down. But that would require passing Grunwald who showed gave no indication whatsoever that he was prepared to abandon slowpoke mode. Benton was reminded of a bumper sticker that had been popular back at the college. Grunwald was his local boss, Morris his global boss. She he think globally and act locally, or was it the reverse?

Morris stood waiting at the bottom of the escalator, a tall, slender figure with thick dark hair, his hands in the pockets of his charcoal gray suit. “How much do you suppose he paid for that suit?” Grunwald said.

“Well, as a former college professor I naturally know quite a bit about cutting edge fashion for today's well-to-do man. He paid ...a lot.”

As they stepped off the escalator Grunwald muttered, “We could have left at 1:30. Plenty of time.”

Morris ignored him and spoke to Benton for the first time that day. “So, I hear you’re already covered,” Morris said. To be covered was to have sufficient work on existing projects to be able to bill every hour of your time to one of them.
“Thanks to Tom, I am,” Benton said. “Of course, winning this Foghorn contract wouldn’t hurt either.”

They approached the turn style to enter the Metro heading south to the District. Morris glided past the bar in one smooth motion, like a phantom, while Benton stood fumbling to find which jacket pocket he had left his ticket in. It took many anxiety-filled seconds, while Morris stood waiting, for the machine to suck in the ticket and for Benson to push through the bar and scoop up the returned ticket. He and Morris turned to look for Grunwald, who had apparently vanished without a trace. No, there he was, over by the ticket machines. He had bent over to retrieve some change he must have dropped and a puffy band of flesh appeared between his shirt and pants.

Quietly, Morris said, “This is why I like to leave early.”

Since it was just the two of them Benton thought it important to acknowledge in some way the statement just made by the second most senior officer of the firm. He coughed.

Morris turned and looked away, out past the next escalator to the platform below where a train had just arrived on the Red Line going south. Only two people got off: a teenage boy shouldering an improbably large backpack and a tall gray man in a white naval uniform. People on the platform scurried into the car. The train sped away and Morris glanced over his shoulder to where Grunwald had finally appeared at the turnstile with a ticket in his hand.

“So how are you settling in?” Morris asked Benton as the three of them moved forward again.
“To the firm I’m settling in; to the city, I don’t know.”

“Where was it you were before?”

“Maine,” Mike said, “Colby College.”

“Well, next time you visit Maine maybe you can stay with our Executive Vice President,” Grunwald said. “who, I understand, has a lovely vacation home there.”

“It’s in New Hampshire,” Morris said stiffly.

"Maine, New Hampshire, it's all Chipmunk Nation as far as I'm concerned."

The Metro was different from the one Benton was used to as a graduate student in New York. Ceilings were cavernous. Walls had been recessed so far from where the public stood that a can of spray paint would be of little use in trying to write one’s name. Grunwald sat on the concrete bench; Benton stood behind him; About halfway between the bench and the tracks Morris did a very slow march, step by careful step, three paces forward, three paces back, stopping for a moment before each turn. Benton looked over into the dark tunnel wondering when that next train would appear.

After a time Morris said, “What kinds of questions will we get?”

“Well, here’s a question, as I believe I have pointed out, that we're sure to get: 'Who the hell’s going to do your interviewing?'

“Why do you keep insisting that’s such a problem?”

“Because we have 6000 Compax interviews to do by December; they know that as well as we do.” Compax, Benton knew, was another big DOL project, the biggest project the firm had ever undertaken. “We should have subcontracted the interviews to CST.” Benton had never heard the term “CST” but after a single week in the industry he
could confidently infer the following three things: 1) CST was the name of some rival consulting firm, 2) that said firm would be a competitor for some projects and collaborator on others, and that 3) probably no one in either firm could remember what the letters C, S, and T had originally stood for.

“It is not in our interest to give away business,” Morris said.

“And it’s not in our interest to lose business. Failing to meet our contractual obligations is a very good way to lose business.”

“And just when have we ever done that?”

“Never,” Grunwald said, “That’s my point. When Sig was Executive VP he preached and preached contractual obligation. He preached it to me until he was blue in my face.” Under almost any other circumstances Benton might have chuckled at that.

“But Sig was never in the middle of an employee buyout, was he? We’re leveraged,” Morris said, “We need cash flow.”

The lights set in the floor along the edge of the track started flashing; Grunwald hoisted himself up off the bench. Morris had turned and was facing the track as a train came whooshing in, blasted a horn and began to slow down.

“Short-run thinking,” Grunwald said. He tucked in a loose strand of shirt tail where his belly protruded over his belt. “Benton, weren’t you just teaching Intro Economics? Could you please explain to this guy the difference between the short run and the long run?”

A keen awareness of how little he wanted to explain anything to the Executive Vice President came pouring over Benton like a bucket of ice water.
Morris said, “As Keynes put it, 'In the long run we’re all dead?’” He looked at Benton, who, for half a millisecond considered laughing at that, but opted to confine his response to an appreciative, though noncommittal, smile.

On the train Grunwald crowded into a double seat on the left; Morris sat across the aisle next to the window. Benton looked from left to right for a few tense seconds then decided to slide into the seat behind Grunwald. Morris made a show of raising his left arm, pushing back a sleeve fastened with a silver cufflink, and frowning as he consulted a gold watch. Benton wondered if it might be a Rolex – he had never seen an actual Rolex.

“Will you stop worrying?” Grunwald said, “We’ve got plenty of time. We’re going to sitting there waiting, I’m telling you.”

“What you seem to fail to grasp,” Morris said, “is that even if they’re not ready for us when we arrive, it won’t look good to show up late.”

“Oh, you’re worried about the ‘appearance of impropriety’, huh? Look, Toby Minnelli is the straw boss up there, he’s never been on time for a meeting in his life.”

“I know Toby as well as you do. He would not like us to be late.”

“Ok, I’ll bet you ten bucks that nobody says a word about it. Young Benton here will hold the money.”

Morris merely turned to look out at the dark tunnel speeding by the window. Benton, deciding that there might be much more to see out in that dark tunnel than he had previously realized, did the same.

A loudspeaker said, “Next station, Du Pont Circle.” Benton’s body leaned
forward abruptly as the train slowed, but neither Grunwald or Morris seemed to notice.

“I know we’ve discussed this but I think we’re going to have to cut out some of the subs.”

Grunwald sighed. “Yes, we certainly have discussed it. There are no subs to cut. There simply are no subs to cut.” Benton had to search his mental glossary: subs were obviously subcontractors.

“I see,” Morris said, “Will you explain that to the United States Department of Labor when they tell us we need to cut some if we want to win the contract?”

“Yes, I will, as matter of fact,” Grunwald said. “I am quite prepared to defend the proposal as is.”

The loudspeaker said “This is the Red Line to Glenmont.”

“Well,” Morris said, “If the proposal is already perfect, then why are we bothering to go to Best and Finals? Why don’t we just tell them we refuse to accept any questions? Save us all a lot of time.”

“You think I wouldn’t?” Grunwald said. “Look, we don’t even know what questions they’ll have,” Grunwald said. “Why are you making up answers to questions we haven’t even been asked, yet?”

Most of the passengers got up to leave but neither Grunwald nor Morris made a move, so this must obviously not be their stop. Two gray haired women with great big purses stood talking as they waited for the train doors to open. Benton thought about how very much he would like to get up and get out with them. Probably the three of
them would do a little shopping; maybe stop for coffee and scones at Starbucks; Benton would ask them about their grandchildren.

Morris didn’t answer Grunwald; he turned again to stare out of the window. The doors closed and Benton felt the acceleration tug him backwards. Nothing more was said until the train stopped at Judiciary Square, which was a long way off in terms of Metro stops.

On the way up the escalator to 2nd Street, Morris asked Grunwald another question. “Who will be principal investigator if you get reassigned to Compax?”

“Well I suppose young Dr. Benton here could fill the bill. In a year I see him managing the whole project.” Benton felt a sharp ping of fear. He was an empiricist, an econometrician, a numbers cruncher, a geek, for heavens sake. He had no experience whatsoever of management.

To Benton, Morris said, “That would be quick for someone in this firm, to be a managing a project within one year. Think you could handle that?”

Whatever his actual thoughts on that subject, Benton knew instantly what was almost certainly the correct answer to that question, and also knew how much more effective that answer would be if he could get the words out without clearing his throat first.

“Ahhhghhhh,” he said. “I think that would be an interesting challenge.”

“A challenge indeed,” Grunwald said, “with Bobby Lowman as the contract officer.”

“Was it necessary to say that?” Morris asked. “Wouldn’t it be better for new staff
members if our remarks were *encouraging* instead of *discouraging*?"

“Who’s being discouraging?” Grunwald said, “I didn’t mention Becky Rhinehart, did I?”

The Francis Perkins Building, named for FDR’s Secretary of Labor, the first woman to ever serve in a presidential cabinet, occupies a full city block between 2nd and 3rd St. just north of Constitution Avenue. Interstate 395 passes through a tunnel right underneath it and the exhaust is vented through two great shafts running up through the building. Everyone hopes those shafts do not leak.

It took 15 minutes to clear security and they made it up to the 4th floor to the chairs outside the closed door of Employment and Training Administration’s conference room at 5 after 1:00.

“As I predicted, we are late,” Morris said.

“And as *I* predicted, no one cares,” Grunwald said. “Do you see anyone standing here tapping his foot? We’ll be lucky if they let us in there inside the hour.”

The conference door opened and a woman with black hair streaked in gray poked her head out. An identification tag, with a picture of her obviously much-younger self, hung down from a chain around her neck.

“Hi Tom, Hi Greg. Be with you in a minute, we’re just finishing up.”

Grunwald smiled brightly at her. “We’ll be here, Becky.”


“She said they’d be a minute, didn’t she? Have you forgotten how long a federal minute is?” They sat silently while a surprisingly large number of federal minutes passed.
Finally Grunwald said, “Who do you think’s in there now?”

“Probably MPR,” Morris said, “Maybe CST.”

The door opened again and the woman Becky came out with two men in suits, one in his fifties, the other perhaps 35 or 40.

The older man said, “Hi Tommy, Hi Greg.” Morris and Grunwald smiled and nodded, then looked at each other. The older man seemed to notice their exchange of looks and his own smile seemed to get a bit broader. “Thanks, Becky,” he said, “see you folks.” He leaned and said something quietly to his younger companion when the two walked away toward the elevators.

“Give us a minute guys,” Becky said, “We’ll be right with you.”

“No hurry,” Morris said. When she’d closed the door turned to Grunwald. “What does this mean?”

Grunwald was shaking his head. He kept his voice low. “It means they’re in bed together. MPR must have subbed all of its survey work over the CST. That’s what I wanted to do. Damn. Why doesn’t anybody in Boston ever listen to me.”

For long moment Morris just looked at the floor. “Do we have a plan?”

Grunwald just shook his head again and rubbed a hand through his thinning hair.

Damn,” he said.

Becky opened the door again and waved them all into the room.

Three DOL people, two women and one man, sat on one side of a big wooden conference table. Behind them was a wall decorated with black and white photos of previous commissioners of employment and training. Benton was determined to find a
place in some remote corner of the room to lurk in, but Morris's hand on his back silently
guided him to a chair at the table between the Executive VP and Grunwald. The woman
Becky -- who turned out to be the apparently-unmentionable Becky Rhinehart -- did
introductions all around.

“Thank you for coming gentleman. Again, sorry about the delay.”

“What, five minutes?” Grunwald said brightly, “That’s the shortest waiting time
I’ve ever had for any meeting Toby called. On the kickoff meeting for the JTPA study he
forgot about us and went to lunch.” The DOL folks all laughed.

The heavy set man who was Toby pointed a finger at Grunwald. “He’s been
telling that story for 5 years; it's not true. Somebody scheduled another meeting over top
of theirs.”

“Greg, you were there,” Grunwald said to Morris, “he went to lunch didn’t he?”

“Well,” Greg said, “it was the first time this firm was asked if we knew how to
get marinara sauce off a white shirt.” More laughter.

“And we’ve listed it in the Corporate Capabilities section of every proposal
since,” Grunwald added.

After the few seconds the mirth, the meeting settled down. “Here are our
questions about the proposal,” Becky said. She pushed a large white envelope across the
table to Grunwald. “You answers are due on Friday, the 12th at 1:00 PM.”

“Mostly routine stuff, it was a good proposal,” Toby Minnelli said, He glanced at
Becky. “But there is one more substantive matter.”

“We notice that you propose to do all the survey stuff in house,” Becky said, “we
expected you to subcontract that out. We know that you’re going to be running the second follow up for the JTPA study at about the same time. Can you really do all of that survey work?”

“Funny you should ask,” Grunwald said, “Greg and I had a HUGE argument about this.” He looked at Greg. “Didn’t we?”


“Greg wanted to sub out the survey stuff to … I don’t know, CST I think it was.”

“CST.” Greg nodded.

“As principal investigator I absolutely refused to have it done outside.” Grunwald put his palms on the table and sat back in his chair. He said nothing more.

After a few seconds Becky and Toby looked at each other. “Why?” Becky asked.

“Because it won’t be done right.” Grunwald said. “The survey instrument has to evolve directly from the process study. The same team needs to train those interviewers. And our interviewers have done this sort of thing before, on JTPA. CST’s haven’t done this kind of work.” He looked at Morris. “Have they, Greg?”

“Not that I know of,” Greg said, “I had to admit Tom was right about that.” He smiled, “I always hate it when Tom’s right about something.”

“But how are you going to have the time or the staff?” Toby said.

“My words exactly,” Greg said. “But does this guy listen to me?”

“How can I listen to you when you’ve grabbed me by the ears?” Grunwald fairly hollered. Becky giggled. “I would not let him sub out the interviews,” Grunwald said,
“but this is what we’ll do: we’ll get someone to do the JTPA stuff. It’s the second follow
up; it’ll be routine by then.”

“I actually saw that Tommy was making sense, for once.” Morris said.

“Hey, that’s not the only time I ever made sense,” Grunwald protested, “There was that other time in ’97, remember?”

“Yeah, I forgot,” Morris, said. “He made sense by predicting that Monica Lewinsky would never be maid of honor at Chelsea Clinton’s wedding.”

“In all seriousness,” Grunwald said, “I’d be happy to let CST do the last of the JTPA stuff, I’m sure even they can handle that. But this survey, no way. I told Greg, ‘If you sub that out, get another principal investigator; I won’t do it.’” Grunwald sat back again. “’Quality control’ I told him, ‘pure and simple.’”

“And of course I couldn’t say anything to that,” Greg said, “especially since he was squeezing my windpipe.”

Loud peals of laughter from Becky Rhinehart. “You two are a scream,” she said. “You should go on the nightclub circuit.”

Out at the elevator, Greg turned to leave them. “I’m going to stop in on Randy Rubenstein in Unemployment,” he said. Morris touched Benton on the arm and tilted his head toward Grunwald. “Stick with this guy, you can learn a lot.” He walked off down the corridor and Grunwald and Benton were alone in the elevator.

“Some fun, huh?” Grunwald said.

“Surprising. Maybe even amazing.”
“How so?”

“Well, you and Greg,” Benton said. “Was it my imagination, or were you guys a little … different up there?”

“Different?”

“Yeah, I think I detected an ever-so-slight change in the tone of your interactions with Greg Morris.”

The door opened, and as Grunwald followed Benton out of the elevator he put both of his hands on the younger man’s. “You’re new here, aren’t you?” he said.