

Preface

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Bipartisan Confirmation of Director of CISA

At a Senate hearing before the Committee on Homeland Security David Crawford was unanimously recommended for confirmation as Director of the recently reconstituted Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). Unlike many recent Senate hearings this one was marked by informality and bipartisan agreement. In his testimony David Crawford introduced his six children and paid special tribute to his wife, Clara, who he said always keeps him grounded. Most of the discussion focused on the need to provide security for the 2020 cycle of national elections.

THE NEW YORK TIMES. Thursday January 23, 2020

Exposed: CISA Chief's Emails to Mistress

Late yesterday, Politico reported that a hacker has captured the emails of David Crawford, the newly nominated Director of CISA and the likely person who will lead the country's cybersecurity efforts. Politico also received copies of sexually explicit emails purportedly sent by Crawford to a Lebanese woman living in Virginia, Isra Nasri. Ronald Dearborn, the Chair of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, declared that the hearings would be extended in the light of this development. The CISA, he added, was actively searching for the source of the hacking.

At a news conference David Crawford denied writing the emails, saying they were forgeries. The president tweeted "DISGRACEFUL. David's so great. Must be the Dems." However, later the same day, Isra Nasri announced through her lawyer that the emails were genuine and that she'd had a relationship with David Crawford for the past two and a half years.

Adam was no longer sure. Was this the first time he had become aware that Julia was getting more stressed? She was not the stressed-out kind. But recently, she'd changed. She worried. She worried a lot. About seemingly unimportant matters. Adam wished he'd taken more notice of this earlier.

Outside, the January night air was unusually cold and crisp for the Bay Area. He and Julia were propped up in bed watching Google News on his laptop. Julia kept pulling her long black hair back behind her shoulders, something she did when feeling anxious. Lucky, their much-indulged Maltipoo rescue dog, lay curled up at the end of the duvet staring at Adam with his irresistible brown eyes. Liz, their daughter, was fast asleep in the next room. They were fortunate. For all of her nine years she had been a great sleeper.

The news was focused, of course, on the alarming spread of the coronavirus in China, which had just expanded its lockdown to encircle thirty-five million of its citizens. Thirty-five million! Meanwhile, ten patients in Northern California were being held in isolation awaiting results of testing. Adam and Julia watched the president at a press conference insisting that everything was under control. That's when Julia's temper, inherited from her father, Arturo, erupted and she began ranting.

"Here we are in the epicenter of the outbreak in our country, and all the government can say is to stay calm, nothing to worry about?" She looked like she would burst into tears any moment.

Adam pointed out that the president's main justification for re-election was the economy, so he was naturally focused exclusively on that. She kept at it. "Great! So now we all have to pretend that there's nothing to worry about?" As a scientist Adam had to admit that, indeed, the virus was highly infectious and had no respect for national boundaries. That it was only a question of when, not if, it spread beyond China. "So, I'm right to be concerned," Julia said. Yes, sure she was.

Wanting to get off the subject, he asked her to guess who came to his office today, which of course she couldn't. Two agents from the CISA, he said. She asked what that was. He told her it was the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the Homeland Security division in charge of protecting the 2020 electoral process.

"You're suspected of being a hacker now?" she asked, recovering her characteristic sense of humor.

He told her that they wanted his help in tracing the identity of the person who had hacked the emails of the man slated to be CISA's director.

"I remember now. The sleaze ball who was having an affair that was exposed just as he was about to be nominated by the Senate as director."

"That's him. These days an affair is no big deal, especially in the president's eyes. It was lying to the Senate that tripped him up. The president and apparently everyone in the White House were furious at the way he was outed by a hacker. They're after blood. Not that it's that easy to trace a hacker."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I hope the hacker doesn't get caught."

"At any rate—and this is confidential—"

"Confidential!" Now she was almost out of the bed. "This government calls all its shady dealings confidential—"

"All right. All right. I'm just repeating what these two guys from the CISA were saying—that they were dealing with highly sensitive material, by which of course they meant politically sensitive material."

"Assholes! So what do they want from you?"

“They knew about me teaching that graduate seminar in hacking. They asked me to make it an exercise for my class. Have the students try to trace the hacker of the CISA director’s emails.”

“And why would you want to take on that can of worms?”

“They offered to make a seven-figure contribution to UC Berkeley in return.”

“Whoa! A bribe to do their dirty work.”

“That’s one way of seeing it.”

“How else can you see it?”

“University science departments depend heavily on federal funds to balance their budgets, as you know.”

“Yes. A corrupt way for the government to keep universities in line.”

“Academics, like businessmen, have to walk a fine line between financial and ethical demands.”

“Where is the line between ethical and unethical? No, please don’t tell me, because I won’t agree with you. So. You’re going to take this on?”

“How’d you guess?”

Adam had always envied Julia her clear-cut responses to issues, even though they often left him embarrassed at what he thought of as his more nuanced and considered stance. The more he argued with himself on the pros and cons of something the further he felt from resolution. Ever since his schooldays he’d simultaneously congratulated and criticized himself for this disposition. And while he admired Julia’s hardline liberal stance on things, another part of him looked at their radically divided country and thought that the near paralysis of Washington was because almost everyone there adopted as hard a line as she did. Both of his reactions were sincere but mutually exclusive. The result? An impossible search for compromise. So, he ricocheted between the two opposing views, depending on which was most compelling at any given moment. He wasn’t proud of this attitude, but he couldn’t see how to escape it. Truth was complex.

Julia took no prisoners. It was all or nothing for her. She came from a traditionally left-wing, working-class, Stockton family and, over time, she’d developed a more radical attitude than either her Mexican American father or mother born in the mid-west where she went to the University of Minnesota. After a period working as a journalist for *The Mercury News*, Julia had joined the ACLU of Northern California, the perfect employer for someone with her purist views. She worked her way up to become an investigator for the legal/policy team, where she could satisfy her single-minded pursuit of right-wing iniquities with Public Record Act requests calculated to embarrass the government.

Recently she had researched the case of a US citizen of Pakistani descent who’d been placed on the government’s Suspicious Activity Report list for attempting to buy a large quantity of computers. In fact he was only doing his job as the purchasing agent for his Silicon Valley computer consulting company. Julia gleefully witnessed the government’s discomfort at being outed for its blatant attempt to racially profile him. The government attorney was forced to issue a grudging apology. Julia was good at finding the hard evidence the ACLU legal team needed to win a fight.

After closing the laptop, Julia announced that she hadn’t been sleeping well the previous few nights. “I wake up from a nightmare and have to get out of bed to make sure I don’t continue with the same dream as soon as I get back to sleep. That means I stay awake for an hour or more before dropping off. That can happen two or three times a night.”

When Adam looked into her face, he saw dark circles under her beautiful brown eyes.

“I’m sorry that’s happening to you. Sounds like your anxiety’s playing up again.”

“That’s pretty obvious.” With that she reached into her nightstand drawer, took out a thermometer, and she held it in her mouth until it pinged.

“Well?” he asked.

She looked annoyed. “97.8. But these digital thermometers are known to be unreliable.”

She replaced the thermometer and pulled out a bottle of Ambien. She swallowed two green pills. Funny, Adam thought. He could have sworn that Ambien came in white tablets.

He said nothing. It was Friday night and she didn’t need to drive anywhere first thing.

Adam asked himself if he should have taken more notice of the way Julia’s temper was growing shorter? He’d always believed in respecting other people’s autonomy. He guessed that was a reaction to his dad who spent his life trying unsuccessfully to control what his mother said and did. He had always wondered why his father persisted when she never gave an inch. If his father had been a model that he had reacted against, his mother had helped shape much of what he had become. Still, he hoped that he had kept her at a sufficient distance to develop his own identity.

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Yes! A family outing, thought Julia. The two of them had decided to make it a cooking-free day. Well wrapped up for the cold, all three of them walked down College Avenue to Market Hall. The prepared foods there were so good you’d never want to cook your own meals again, were it not for the prices. They made straight for the entrées. Liz pointed through the curved glass covering to the macaroni and cheese. Julia stopped herself from saying that this was the least healthy choice available. Julia went for vegetable tajine and Adam settled on chicken lasagna. They added a side of grilled veggies and moved on to the desserts. Liz opted for ice cream, Adam for chocolate bread pudding and Julia abstained. They rounded off their purchases with a loaf of multigrain bread and a bottle of red Burgundy.

The bill came to over \$100. Exiting the store with a large bag in each hand Adam nearly knocked over Roberto, a local homeless guy who looked in his eighties but was likely half that, stationed just outside. Of course that was Roberto’s intention. But the disparity between what they had just bought and his request to spare a dollar hit home. The need for guys like Roberto to beg for food from people like them made Julia mad—and embarrassed. Adam put down the bags and reached into his shiny leather wallet for a five-dollar bill. She grasped his hand and pointed to a twenty. Adam gave the larger bill to Roberto. Roberto mumbled as he stared at the money. Then he broke into a grin. “Guess I will be living it up esta noche.”

“Don’t spend it all on spirits,” Julia kidded him.

“Can we have some spirits, too?” Liz asked her.

“Smart girl you’ve got there, señora,” Roberto said.

“Too smart,” Julia replied as she urged a hypnotized Liz to move on.

“I didn’t know you could buy spirits. In the story about Aladdin’s Lamp they come out of a bottle.” Liz said.

Adam and Julia laughed.

“The spirits we were talking about come out of a bottle, too, but they don’t turn into genies. Swallowing them can leave you fuzzy.”

“Fuzzy?” Liz asked.

“Unable to walk or think straight.”

“Genies sound much more fun.”

As they headed home Adam remarked, “This morning I was reading that there are around 28,000 homeless in the Bay Area.”

“A house of your own was the American dream the Boomers all bought into,” said Julia. “Now Gen Alphas like Liz face an impossible choice: join the five percent or give up on that dream. Not that I ever subscribed to it. To hell with the dream. It’s a mirage that allows the rich to become even richer. Watching my father chase it through the bars of Stockton cured me of that illusion.”

They turned the corner of Florio, walked halfway up the block and up the long drive leading to their house. Nine years ago they had taken out a hefty mortgage on this roomy 1930s house hidden from the street behind a mass of overgrown trees and bushes. It had a large interior yard between the garage and the house that offered Liz and Lucky an ideal play space. It also featured a large back patio where they had meals, and watched the birds and squirrels fight for food.

“I can’t help feeling that, when she grows up, Liz and her generation will curse us for leaving them with such a mess,” Adam observed.

Liz looked up at Adam with her shining gray eyes. “What mess, Daddy?”

“Nothing, sweetheart,” he replied in the maddening way adults have of avoiding children’s need to know what’s happening in the world they are about to enter.

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Adam had always loved Sundays. Leisurely breakfast and maybe a third cup of Blue Nile blend with the bulky *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* full of advertising supplements. Walk with Liz and Lucky to Chabot Park, giving Julia time to herself. Phone his mother.

His mother had been widowed for three years. His father, a certified financial planner, had succumbed to a stroke when he was only sixty, leaving her comfortable. She stayed on in the house that Adam had been brought up in. Although she was only a few miles away he rarely saw her. But they chatted on the phone most Sundays.

“Hello, Mom. How’s life in wonderful Glen Highlands?”

“Now, Adam. Don’t make fun of Glen Highlands. One day you’ll inherit this house and the lifestyle that goes with it.”

God forbid, he thought. He had no desire to live in that all-white neighborhood.

“What have you been up to?” he asked.

“Actually, I have some news for you. As you know, I have been spending a lot more time with the committee now that the primary is only five weeks away.” His mother had always been politically active. Three years ago she was elected to the Alameda County Democratic Central Committee.

“Well,” she continued, “at last week’s meeting they elected me chair.”

“Congratulations! You deserve it.”

“I’ve spent most of my waking hours since then trying to familiarize myself with everything the committee is doing. Like reasons for endorsing Measure A to help finance Alameda Unified School District. And the bond measure to upgrade fire stations in the unincorporated areas of the County. The list goes on.”

“I’m sure it does,” he said, anxious to divert her from a topic she could expound on for hours.


“How’s Liz doing?” she asked after a pause.

Adam experienced his usual sense of guilt at not having taken Liz to see her during the week.

“She has a cold,” he said truthfully.

“Better that she stayed home,” his mother said, letting him off the hook.

“By the way, I hope you two will be voting for both County measures this March,” she half asked, half demanded.

“Come on. You know we will.” Adam reflected that, once children have grown up, they speak to their parents more brusquely—or is it brutally?—than they do to anyone else. Except maybe their partners. And they—the parents—are usually unbelievably restrained in their response. 

Adam did his best to make up for his last remark by returning to her favorite topic: “It’s great news about your being chair. It shows how much trust the other members have in you.”

“You’re as much a flatterer as your father.”

“He was more of a charmer for sure.”

“You have your moments.”

“Now who’s doing the flattering?”

He continued, “Julia and I were wondering whether the coronavirus will impact the elections.”

“No chance,” she said. “The president’s ratings are currently higher than usual. So he has no interest in seeing the primaries postponed. Besides, we only have a very small number of infected people here. It’s not like we’re in China.”

“I know. But viruses are notoriously unpredictable.” There was a pause.

“How’s Barack?” he asked. Barack was her new kitten. Adam was still annoyed that she had named an animal after his favorite president.

“How do you think? An adorable bundle of mischief. Just this morning I caught him trying to chew through the cable connecting the power to the TV.”

“That’s scary. What did you do?”

“I shouted at him and he rushed under the sofa.”

“And where is he now?”

“Purring on my lap.”

“You treat him better than you did me.”

“Now, dear, you know that’s not true.”

“Whatever you say,” he said, while thinking how differently they remembered the past.

There was an awkward silence. “I have to make Liz’s lunch,” he said. “So I better go, Mom. Fight the good fight—for all of us.”

“You bet I will. Say hello to Julia. And give Liz a kiss for me. Goodbye, dear.”

The phone went dead. Apart from that brief allusion to his childhood, their conversation had steered clear of anything really personal. Why, he wondered, were they both so anxious to avoid talking about matters of the heart? Or just feelings? Had he acquired that habit from her? She was always so calm and controlled. Like him, she hated scenes. Excess of any kind. And her relative wealth had allowed her to maintain control over her circumstances most of the time. As a kid he’d thought she was really cool. Never worked up. Someone who planned ahead and was rarely caught by surprise.

Now he saw it more as a defense mechanism, a way of trying to fend off the unpleasantness of life—not possible of course. It required a selective take on things. And a refusal to acknowledge that any selection was involved.

So much for the myth that men marry their mothers. Julia couldn't have been more different. Volatile, quick tempered, emotionally charged, she was like kelp swept this way and that by the tides of her blood. Was that difference what made him fall for her? And her directness. And her passion. Not to mention how attractive he found her—long iridescent black hair, high cheekbones, piercing brown eyes and sensuous lips. He guessed theirs was a marriage of opposites. Or was it of complements? Jack Sprat and his wife. They sure had had no difficulty licking the platter clean. At least up to that time.

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The next morning Adam was shaving as the TV morning news anchor announced: “The coronavirus outbreak continues to spread, with the death toll now rising to at least 145 people in China where nearly 60 million people are on partial or full lockdown...”

“Listen to this Facebook post,” Julia interrupted. She was still in bed, reading stuff on her cell. “It comes from a member of the Stanford Hospital medical board: ‘Take a deep breath and hold it for more than 10 seconds. If you complete it successfully without coughing, without discomfort, stiffness or tightness, it proves there is no fibrosis in the lungs; it basically indicates no infection.’ It goes on to say that, if you drink water every fifteen minutes, it will flush the virus from your throat into your stomach where acid will kill it.”

“Sounds like another rumor to me,” Adam replied.

Adam always was a skeptic. She admired him for it. But sometimes it made her mad.

“What makes you think that?” she asked.

Julia had found herself both fascinated and terrified by anything to do with the virus over the past few days. It was becoming an obsession, the idea that death was so close to all of them, silently stalking them out there on the street. It filled her with a kind of fear she'd never encountered before. She guessed it was the first time in her life that she'd even thought about the possibility of dying. *To sleep, perchance to dream*. More like a nightmare from which you couldn't wake up—because it turned out you weren't asleep.

But Adam, with his scientific training, immediately questioned this home cure.

“Let's have a look at it,” Adam said. Wearing only his boxer shorts, razor in hand, he came to look over her shoulder. “See. Facebook has added a link to the CDC website. I bet if you click it that it will debunk the posting.”

Julia duly followed the link and read a redirected message from Stanford Healthcare warning that this misinformation was not from Stanford University.

“Too bad,” she said. “I guess we'll all have to take our temperatures every morning.”

“You really think that's necessary?”

“We could be facing an epidemic here. And one of the first signs that you've been infected is having a fever.”

“Epidemic?”

“That's what the media is calling what's happening in China.”

“China is not the US.”

“Then why has the mayor of San Francisco just activated an emergency operations center to centralize responses to outbreaks of the virus?”

“I guess you have a point.”

“You bet I have a point.”

Adam withdrew. She knew he thought she was being alarmist. But wasn't it better to find out if you had been infected, especially when you could be putting others in danger? Adam had

always downplayed any possibility of getting ill. He carried around an aura of invulnerability, as if he were exempt from life's exigencies. That trait was part of what attracted her to him in the first place, having been brought up in a volatile and unstable family. But now she found herself getting irritated by him. He was just too damned collected. He was treating her growing alarm as a caprice. *Infierno!* Why would he take risks with his own family?

It was strange. After Adam had convinced her that the cure was fake she felt less secure than she had before. She guessed this was because the online world of rumors offered her a refuge of sorts. A refuge from the material world where deadly viruses could attack her unseen.

Returning to the mirror Adam saw that he had nicked his neck with the razor, which brought their exchange to an end.

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Tuesday and Thursday mornings were always a frantic rush to get up, shower, have breakfast and drop Liz off at Chabot Elementary on his way to the university. At 10 a.m. he taught a large one-hour sophomore class, Internet and Network Security, followed at 12 p.m. by Advanced Topics in Computer Security, a three-hour graduate seminar. It was the students in that seminar whom the Homeland Security agents wanted to trace the hacker.

That Tuesday morning turned into a sequence of minor disasters.

As he was getting out of bed he saw a sizeable blood stain on the far end of the duvet where Lucky slept. He examined Lucky and saw that, sure enough, he had chewed a hot spot on his right back thigh. Admonishing Lucky as he cleaned him up—pointless apart from allowing him to vent his frustration—Adam searched without success for his cone, something Lucky hated having to wear.

"Julia, do you know what's happened to the dog's cone?" he asked.

"It's where you put it after the last time—in the bottom drawer in the closet where it always is," she replied. "Why is it men have a such hard time finding things?"

"But it's men who actually do stuff with the things."

"Oh, please. Don't get me started on that this early in the morning."

Adam fixed the cone on a resisting Lucky and gave him a rub on his tummy— "Sorry, buddy, but it's for your own sake" —before making for the shower. There, he managed to drop a large new bar of soap on his toes. By evening they'd probably turn dark purple.

He went down to the kitchen and sliced a banana onto Liz's Honey Nut Cheerios. He'd poured milk onto them before he realized that she was still upstairs.

"Time for breakfast," he yelled up from the bottom of the stairs. No response. He climbed up to her room and found her still in her pajamas.

"Why aren't you dressed, sweetheart?" he asked.

"I couldn't do it," she said.

"Couldn't do what?"

"Solve the algebra problems in my homework."

"Why didn't you ask me to help you last night?"

"Because you had your friends over and that lasted forever."

"I'm really sorry. You know, I would always make time for you if you asked me."

"What am I going to tell Ms. Fulsome?"

“Just explain that your parents weren’t there to help you last night, but that your father has promised to go over the problems tonight. The most she will do is ask you to bring her the answers in your homework tomorrow.”

“Are you sure, Daddy?”

“If you want me to, I can stop and talk to her when I drop you off.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Why?”

“I’ll talk to her, Daddy. Just leave it to me.”

“OK. But you need to hurry up. We’re leaving in fifteen minutes.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be down real fast,” she said, now smiling.

Liz had barely reached the breakfast table when Julia’s cellphone sounded. As Julia reached for it her sleeve caught the handle of her mug of coffee and knocked it over. A flood of hot coffee raced over the tabletop and poured onto Adam’s lap.

“So sorry, *cariño*,” she said, barely suppressing the impulse to burst out laughing at his predicament.

“Ow! You sure drink your coffee hot,” he called back as he rushed upstairs to change.

Of course he was late leaving with Liz, and rain was pouring down. When they reached the end of the drive, he realized that he had forgotten to take her packed lunch. He ran back to the house where a grinning Julia greeted him with the lunch box. “My absent-minded professor,” she teased. He ran back to the car drenched, and willed himself to drive under thirty to her school.

When he reached the Berkeley campus the lot was almost full and he had to park on the highest level. Then, he realized that he’d left his office key at home and had to borrow a duplicate from the department office. By the time he got to class he was eight minutes late. After he’d started his presentation at least another six students crept in by the rear entrance and slid sheepishly into their seats. That made him feel a little less guilty. But he couldn’t put his all into the class and the result was obvious in the distracted faces of many of the students. Each class was a new challenge, and he knew he had failed to meet this one.

That day’s topic was the California Consumer Privacy Act that had just come into effect at the start of the year. This was a new digital privacy law that allowed consumers to opt out of the sale of their personal information. When one student expressed indignation at this encroachment on the workings of the free market, he uncharacteristically lost his cool and asked sarcastically, what made her think any market was totally free? Didn’t the New York Stock Exchange have a trip mechanism? She looked flustered and didn’t respond. After class he apologized to her, explaining that he was feeling frustrated by his own failure to connect with them. She silently accepted his apology and left. That class, he told himself, was definitely not a success.

What is that saying? “Setbacks are just learning experiences.” He wasn’t convinced. Sometimes setbacks are just setbacks.

He went directly to his car to keep an 11:30 appointment with the chief lending officer at the Bank of America on College Avenue. He and Julia were applying to refinance their mortgage. The rain never let up.