

Senator Chaise Landon wants to change 2036 America, where being homosexual is worse than illegal - it's dangerous. Just one problem: when the corporate leaders and Christian Kingdom running the U.S. chose Landon, they didn't know he was himself gay.

For The Common Good

By Truscott Jones

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FOR THE COMMON GOOD

What happens when the powerful get desperate?

TRUSCOTT JONES

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First Edition

One

Reverend Jimmy Goodfellow was dying. His congregation was praying. Not only the several thousand at his Bend, Oregon megachurch, but millions of his television devotees across the country. And the Republican political elite circled, ensuring not a morsel of vicarious esteem would be lost to them when Reverend Jimmy passed on to his great reward.

Goodfellow was only 63. At six-foot, three inches, his already long face was stretched by tapered sideburns reaching all the way to his jaw line and a tall, narrow nose starkly dividing his skull. Sweat-soaked wisps of unruly white hair matted to his skull. Slate gray eyes, spellbinding on camera, were closed now, underlined by purplish depressions, his lashes crusted with flecks of dried discharge. Pale, yellowish skin stretched tightly across his cheekbones, proclaiming the success of end stage liver disease.

This prone and helpless appearance was a far cry from the Christian Kingdom leader the nation had known so well the last two decades. Rising from the small-town church he founded with a few passionate disciples, Goodfellow deftly targeted an undercurrent of traditional fear using the modern spears of the internet: Tweeting and Facebooking and YouTubing his growing throng of admirers until the masters of corporate media came to him on bended knee.

From his pulpit each Sunday evening – Jimmy’s message was too important for the sleepy mornings before football, and the nighttime slot allowed his network of local ministers, “Apostles of the Goodfellow,” to build anticipation for his pronouncements – the Reverend decried the evils dragging down America in the time-honored manner of finding someone to blame. He delivered his inspirations from behind a mahogany podium lacquered to a sheen which, through the reflection of stage lights, framed his torso in an angelic aura. The top of the lectern was set belt high so that Goodfellow towered above it. Standing on an apron five feet above the first pew of congregants, he indeed appeared a giant among

mortals. Behind him a vast expanse of blood red carpet stretched to the base of a three-story wall, the Lord Jesus himself at the center, 12 feet tall, affixed to a crucifix of the same polished wood and emitting the same glow as Jimmy's pedestal. Almost every wide camera angle showed the two in tandem, Jimmy and Jesus, the blood trickling from the Savior pooling into the lush padding of the Reverend's stage.

A reverential distance on either side of the Christ, and set equally well behind Goodfellow, the white-robed Christian Kingdom choir stood upon six rows of risers, the darker their skin the greater the contrast to their gleaming gowns. This supporting cast was chosen not only for vocal prowess, but also to grant a multiracial, ethnically diverse and cross-generational endorsement to the words of the Reverend. Their hymns lifted, transported and punctuated each night's theme.

But to the many millions gathered around their flat-screened Hubs, the most impressive stagecraft of all was Jimmy's devoted audience. These were people *just like you*. Yes, some wailed, shut-eyed with face and hands raised to heaven in the throes of passion, and some thrust hand-painted signs into the air: "God LOVES," or "Protect the Innocent," or "Tell It Jimmy!!" But most were simply ... people. Ordinary, normal people. Old people. Families. Teenagers with braces. Young newlyweds. And most spent their three to five seconds on air calmly smiling, or slowly nodding, or pained with compassionate concern, depending upon the vibe. The congregation was *Our Town*, your town, everyone's town. They emitted comfort and community, a peaceful gravity drawing in the vast viewing public as Goodfellow's voice gently rolled over the pews and into homes across America.

The true power of James Joseph Goodfellow, though, was his message, for he knew how to inflict dependence. The Reverend could feel the pulse of craving in his followers. In the right measure, through his blog and video postings, and well-timed tweets and texts, Goodfellow questioned and teased and challenged and mocked and inspired *his* people, a crescendo of Godly notations that each day built to the culminating Sunday sermon.

The specific topics varied, of course. One evening it would be the drunkards, “for he who finds his salvation in the *spirits* of the bottle instead of the *Spirit* of Jesus Christ is damned, and a damned fool!” The next week it may be the unemployed, “as the Lord says in Proverbs 21, verse 25, ‘The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labor,’ and so to those who wander our streets seeking pity, we say, make a path to God with your sweat, for He, and we, will not tolerate parasites.” Or perhaps the concern may be with illegal aliens, or liberals, or those non-fundamentalists not completely right with the Lord.

But the specific theme was secondary. More important was feeding the common, underlying craving – the basic need to be *right*, to be *better*, to *matter*. Jimmy well understood that whatever their individual circumstance, his congregants wanted to see themselves as relevant and desired: validation – simple justification for absurd wealth or punishing poverty, for spoiled children or failed marriages, for unrequited love or unbridled hatreds. And the good Reverend had the formula to satisfy their wants. He possessed a will strong enough to command them to face their mirrors, and the authority to make them see a reflection of goodness. It was addictive.

This obviously left many inconsistencies, which he quashed by creating *The Others*. Those in the Christian Kingdom, those millions of adherents to the word of God as revealed by Jimmy Goodfellow, knew in their hearts and minds that they were good people. They felt the solace of heaven’s blessings simply by contrast to those soulless dregs upon whom society’s worst misfortunes could be laid. *The Others*. With this narcotic, Jimmy infused his followers with hope. There was always hope, because there was always somebody worse.

The Reverend’s most passionate attention was reserved for the homosexual: the lurking, leering, depraved shadow over decent communities everywhere. Clever in their machinations, the gay subculture once nearly swayed an entire country with the virtues of tolerance, acceptance and freedom, as if anyone who refused such attitudes was backward, and hateful. But that was when the economy was plentiful, when dreams of achievement danced in most heads, when a better world seemed at least a possibility. That was before

fear and apprehension became terror and dread. That was before the wide national craving for self-worth which made Jimmy Goodfellow necessary.

In that cause, barely a year before this sad night found Jimmy lying on white hospital sheets, breathing shallow bits of air, he had reminded his people of their fears. "There was a time, well within the memories of all but our children here today, when the homosexual demanded *rights!*" Goodfellow spat, his face scrunched up into a ball, his entire body recoiling from the stench of the very idea. "There was a time when a homosexual could serve openly in our military. There was a time when the homosexual was permitted to teach our young children in the very schools supported by our hard-earned tax dollars." Lifting his eyes to the ceiling, and closing them to look beyond it to the sky outside, the Reverend continued, his suffering visage magnified in magnificent detail on four gigantic screens placed around the packed chapel. "There was even a time when the homosexual was permitted to keep children in their homes – two mommies or two daddies – abusing the brains and bodies of these poor innocents, in what they dared to call 'families.'"

Goodfellow returned his stern gaze to the congregants, taking them in one by one, slowing shaking his head, eyebrows raised in disapproval. "There was a time when the homosexual demanded *marriage*," he added with an exasperated chuckle. "Praise the Lord, that time is past. PRAISE THE LORD!" he commanded.

"Praise the Lord," roared back the reply, some in the crowd raising arms to the god in the sky, or to Reverend Jimmy, or to both.

"Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord," he repeated, more quietly and slowly each time. "And so, with new laws putting our great nation back on the right path, on the *Godly* path, many folks think the danger is no more." He scanned the rows of believers, stopping here and there to zero in on one or another. "Many of you," he pointed, and then pointed again, "many of *you* think the danger has passed us by. Many of *you* believe we can relax. Many of *you* are ready to forget about the peril of the homosexual, thinking it has been defeated."

Goodfellow stepped from behind the podium and walked stage left, hands on his hips, pushing back a blue suit jacket to expose his trademark red suspenders, the same red as both the carpet beneath him and the blood of the suffering Christ. “Brothers and Sisters,” he whispered, bending his upper body forward, “the homosexual is as dangerous as ever.” Many in his audience now leaned forward themselves, as many more inched closer to their screens at home, straining to hear. “It is dangerous *precisely* because it is caged and wounded, ready to strike in desperation, just like any other depraved animal,” Jimmy continued, incrementally adding volume with each word, then raising his hands in the shape of claws and shouting, “It is ready to POUNCE!” Some gasped, others waited, wide-eyed, for guidance. Some cried. A few looked down with shame for having smugly assumed the queers were sufficiently put in place.

“The time when the homosexual could live openly among us as pretend equals has indeed passed. But the time to complete God’s work has just begun,” the Reverend announced, his index finger raised above his head, pointing to the heavens as affirmation. “We all know the devastation they have caused this great land of ours, the diseases they have spread, the children they have corrupted, the destruction of our families, their tearing of the very fabric of our union in Christ.”

Jimmy paused, and as he did a high-resolution picture appeared on the large rectangular displays above. A grotesquely scarred and sullen man loomed over the congregation and filled the Hubs, smartphones and tablets of those at home. His pockmarks and sores were trademark for a public inundated with similar images, ever since the government announced the dangers of a newly resurgent human immunodeficiency virus flowing through the gay underworld.

Soon the ghastly man dissolved into a new picture, of a five-year-old boy in baby blue overalls, a single tear migrated half way down his left cheek, plump red lips turned downward, arms seemingly paralyzed at his sides. In the background, a slightly blurred swingset stood upon a fuzzy beige surface, indistinguishable as either dirt or sand. But slowly, the picture narrowed in on the boy’s upper body, a slight smear of dirt now discernable to the left of his small nose, run

through by the line of water from his eye. Above his right shoulder was the shadow of a figure hunched over one of the swings.

“These creatures of prey,” Jimmy bellowed, “these carriers of physical disease and spiritual decay, these denizens of decadence MUST be cast away, *cast away* to a station and place that befits their betrayal of God Almighty, and their betrayal of these United States of America!” Behind him, a new slide appeared, a young girl holding her mother’s hand on one side, looking up to her father on the other, his hand resting upon her shoulder, the sun’s glow on their foreheads, fields of grain behind them. “Call your Congressman,” Goodfellow demanded with a clenched fist thrust at his audiences, “text them, trend them, tweet them!” The Reverend was beet red with urgency, small spots of sweat on his forehead. Within days, the crush of public opinion pushed the Safe Communities Act, a “pink-zoning” of where known homosexuals could live, to the front of Washington, D.C.’s agenda. A month later, it was law – one of many the Reverend had engineered to eradicate the Gay Menace.

Now, his accomplishments many, but his work undone, Jimmy’s drugged and clouded mind struggled only for breath, not legislation. Those assembled around his bed waited, and prayed. His wife. His manager. His son, Will. His executive assistant. His associate pastors. It had been years since any of them acted absent his guidance, and no one knew, in even the vaguest sense, what lie ahead. Goodfellow had always been their emissary to God’s will. Now he, and thus God, were silent.

* * *

Chaise Landon’s longish hair was more tousled than even its usual haphazard arrangement. Then again, those frantic light brown locks were a major draw for scores of screaming young women who pushed to the front of his rallies – some of them, unfortunately, too young to vote.

His fingers slowing worked their way across his scalp, only temporarily moving strands to new and equally disheveled locations. Concentration was difficult. Numbers past midnight, and on the back end of a 19-hour day, drifted without anchor, floating without

meaning. Yet it was precisely numbers that the odd little man wearing the Dodger blue bow tie and circular spectacles was so carefully sequencing, critical numbers which would drive the next day's lines of attack.

"And then there's the Green's, who are coming in at three percent, maybe one-point-five if you factor in the margin of error. I don't see any of these guys moving up unless we give them the ball, so the point is," Nash Sandler concluded, "stay with our flyover themes, one spotlight a day, and let's build to a powerful convention." He looked at Landon, who he noticed stared absently at the floor, just as he had been since Sandler started.

"Do you want me to go through those numbers again, Senator, or ..."

"No ... no, I got the gist, Nash," Landon said, snapping a brief smile at his campaign manager. In truth, he had heard almost nothing but the seventeen percent figure for "Justicia," formally known as *Partido de Justicia Hispano Americano*. That number surprised him because it seemed low, and it started his mind on a sentimental trail about its presidential nominee, Miguel Miramontes, once a close friend.

Chaise and Miguel were both elected to Congress 10 years earlier. While Miramontes was then a member of the deceased Democratic Party, and Chaise a Republican, they still found they had much in common. Both were 33, both won in districts where they had little chance, and each entered political life with the naïveté of a reformer, though to different ends. When the reality of enforced agendas set in, the two nonetheless maintained a social bond cemented by the immediate camaraderie of their wives. Had it not been for Carmen Miramontes, Landon wondered with little doubt and significant guilt, would the gaps he left for his own wife have been surmountable?

In the aftermath of the election propelling Landon into the Senate, the Democrats shattered into multiple shards of special interest, including Justicia, where Miguel quickly became a rallying force. He and the rising Republican star now had little time for each other, but maintained contact, and mutual admiration. And the bond

between their wives only grew. Landon never lashed out at Miramontes, as he sometimes did at his other rivals – not that any of them were a realistic threat to a Republican yet again winning the presidency.

For Chaise, it was no surprise when Justicia chose Miguel to be its leader. His passion would certainly help assuage the wounds of the marginalized Hispanic community – even if victory in the presidential race was an impossibility. But when the directors of the Grand Old Party selected Landon as their front, he knew it was for entirely different reasons.

The country had been struggling for so long that the energy of discontent was beginning to percolate. The old slogans and appeals to patriotism, the long promoted societal divisions and maneuvered hatreds, the stoked fears and targeted patronage, all waned. One could hear a “clink, clinkity, clink” as the lid rattled from the pressure within the pot. The Republicans needed a new spirit, a compassionate face to comfort the disheartened masses. Landon’s exuberance, his easy features and impassioned cadence, would be the tonic, the necessary contrast to the current president.

Landon was definitely not picked for his perfect ideology – he followed the party platform sufficiently though inconsistently. Truthfully, the party did not completely trust him, resenting his occasional departures from orthodoxy. But the elders knew well that another president from the same old vessel could ferment discontentment into desperation. Sound management dictated a distraction, a change in marketing. And that led to the imperfect but malleably ambitious Senator Landon.

Chaise understood all of this. In fact, most of it had been discussed in rather blunt terms. Miguel was free in his campaign to speak from the heart, and to tell his people the truth. Landon’s leadership, on the other hand, came at a price. His agenda would be well managed, his funds tightly controlled, and his words carefully crafted, all by the very same masters who selected him to front their cause. Landon would have difficulty explaining to Miguel many of the vigorously articulated opinions of his new apostolate – his friend knew him better.

“So, it's definitely not ‘toll roads,’” Sandler explained. “It's ‘public freeways.’ Gives everyone a good sense of ‘We're in this together,’ because it's public. No freeloaders. Users are actually paying their fair share. Everyone's contributing. And we found that ‘public’ also connotes ‘free’ to most people, because if it's provided courtesy of the government, then somehow people think that means someone else paid for it.”

Sandler fingered his bow and smiled weakly. Then his eyes lit up as if he was proud to have saved the best for last. “Oh! And, really important. *Freeways*. Not *highways*. Free reinforces ... well, uh ... *FREE!* ‘High’ comes off too technical, makes people think of *more*, like more money.”

Maybe this would have had more impact were Landon actually listening. “You're saying that tomorrow, if someone complains about all highways becoming toll roads,” he summarized, “I'm supposed to say, ‘Don't worry, pal, they're not toll roads, they're public *freeways?*’”

Sandler shook his head vigorously, disappointed in his student. Landon not only missed the point, but worse, did not seem to appreciate the genius of this latest vocabularian discovery. “No, no, no. First, no one is likely to ask you that. Only approved press will be there.” Of course, *approved press* were always the only ones allowed within shouting distance. “Second, as I said, this will be in your prepared remarks.” Yes, if *we* bring it up first, then it's a virtue, not a problem. “Third ...” Sandler always spoke in triads, “... it really does *sound* good.”

These were truly the moments when Landon felt ... well, like a fraud. The concept of public infrastructure died many years before. Everything not nailed to the floor had been privatized. While this heaped enormous profits upon the multinationals who ransacked the country, try driving from Chicago to St. Louis on an ordinary income, or even from the suburbs to downtown. Managers and directors all had free passes as part of their compensation packages. But for the Average Joe, it was about a buck a mile, automatically charged via GPS (part of the same mandated system required to operate any vehicle) and instantaneously deducted from his account.

The system for apprehending those improperly using these roads was so amazingly efficient, and the punishment so staggeringly high, few dared try. Thus was born a burgeoning “public” transportation industry, also private, and likewise lucrative. Congestion was a thing of the past. Few could afford a car, and even fewer could afford to drive one.

Was this new reality worthwhile? Was it the new American dream? Yet here Landon was, trumpeting a system he knew had spiraled to depressing depths. Somehow, the most prosperous nation in the history of the modern world was, for most, sliding back toward feudalism.

Chaise often felt like this. And so, just as often, he was compelled to ask himself “why?” He thought of Miguel, and that wry smile his friend displayed when, over a beer during those early days in the House, Landon would try to rationalize a new Republican program. Some of the plans actually had merit, but for many of them, the two would devolve into private laughter. Such policies were exponentially different today. Neither would be laughing now.

His companion, his *wife*, Meredith Garrison Landon – she shared his misgivings, comforted his conscience, and eagerly participated in their grand rationalizations. Accomplished, and part of the current administration, she needed the therapy as much as he did. Nonetheless, the sustenance she provided only gave him another reason to feel like a grifter. *The perfect couple*. The power team. Chaise and Meredith, future first family.

“So, are we good, Senator?”

“I don’t know, Nash.” Landon looked at his manager. Sandler felt examined. “Are we?”

* * *

A few scattered groups of two and three walked the beach. The sky was darkening, sunset hidden behind low, charcoal clouds. Crosswinds blew with a bravado that forced caps down or jacket collars up. Short waves raced across the sand. People kept their distance, as if afraid of being bitten by the icy cold water.

Someone, older than a child based on its intricate design, had built a castle just now within the surf's reach. Diamond in shape, four tall battlements marking each turn, the fortress' walls were ten inches high and thick, painstakingly crafted with miniature carvings designed into impeccably smoothed facades. There was, of course, a moat surrounding the entire arrangement and but one entrance, represented by an etched outline of the bottom of a drawbridge. Inside the diamond were multiple other structures, some round, some square, some large, some small, grouped into three separate areas, each region progressively elevated and surrounded by its own protective six-by-six-inch fortification. The project was clearly a work of great collaboration and significant time. If built in reality, the thing would have been near impregnable.

But as masterful as was its craftsmanship, the castle was no match for the coming offensive. The Pacific had first crawled close enough to repeatedly fill the moat, which temporarily did its job as the water soaked through the bottom of the pit and deeper into the sand. But eventually, the determined waves stretched to the facing walls, weakening their bases bite by bite until first one section, then another, fell. Within minutes of the assault, all but the uppermost region of the interior was rendered an uneven mush barely distinguishable from the surrounding flat shore. The next surges searched for weakness without doing any further damage, but in the distance a particularly violent crash signaled a more determined effort.

Brady walked the Oregon beach, purposeless, unable to focus upon any specific thought, when the loud clap of that last wave jarred him from his aimless trance, causing his body to freeze and his head to jerk suddenly toward the roiling. He watched the foamy aftermath slinking toward the remnants of the castle, then touching it, licking away a chunk from the base of one of the towers which, lacking support, crashed to the ground. Even in its current deteriorated state, Brady was impressed. From its lumpy, soaked leftovers, he could deduce how much effort and pride must have gone into creating the fortress.

Not unlike the many things he had crafted and molded, Brady thought. Over the years, he toiled longer and harder hours for less pay, carrying more and greater responsibilities for fewer benefits each year, each new union contract tearing down his and his family's and his buddies' standards of living, one piece at a time. While the cannery grew, Brady conquered each new machine – how to make it work, how to take it apart, how to coax every ounce of efficiency out of it. Progressing through the ranks, he learned to perform the same tricks on his co-workers, prodding, soothing, coaching, until they too hummed with productivity. And the processed tonnage of salmon and albacore and halibut grew, year after year, with both Brady's employer and his brothers and sisters on the floor continually turning to him for ideas and inspiration. Westport Cannery seemed immune to the fate of its competitors, who left the shores of the Columbia one after the other.

Maybe he should have seen the end coming. Wages rose in smaller increments until that last contract when, to keep the doors open, they said, management demanded a freeze. Even those last negligible increases couldn't maintain the digits next to the e-check's dollar sign as health and tax deductions skyrocketed. The squeeze was unsettling, then depressing, and eventually suffocating. Brady could not – would not – suffer the humiliation of losing more ground.

The cannery's general manager, Bud Linsdale, was certainly sympathetic. Even though he wore dress shirts and slacks now, they were always rumpled, and Bud never forgot his years on the floor. But the decisions were not his to make. When he and Brady agreed there was no way out, no further sacrifice for the laborers to make, the dark suits rolled in.

Per usual, Brady had arrived at the employee lot before daybreak that fateful date. A mist floated below the sole functioning lamp post. Parked directly underneath it was a monstrous, black Mercedes-Benz G-Class 900 sport utility, the illumination creating a metallic sheen on the vehicle's roof and hood. Many years had passed since the corporate types last dropped by the Westport property. The threat of a strike clearly garnered their attention. Brady hadn't known when

the next move would be, only that the union contract expired in 10 days. Apparently, the next move was today.

As he walked into the building, the noise on the floor was at high decibel even for this early hour, given that the plant operated without pause in three overlapping shifts. Forty feet away, a gaggle of a dozen or so co-workers huddled next to Line Four's can seamer. Across the distance, Old Henri gave Brady an anxious half smile, and his colleagues all turned at once in his direction. Brady began to remove his gloves and head in their direction, but just two steps later, Henri pointed up, followed by everyone's eyes, to the glass-walled conference room overlooking the floor. Bud sat at the table's edge, head in his hands and his back to the operations below, lorded over by a suit. Brady looked back to Henri and his crew, staring at him in anticipation.

"When?" Brady shouted, angling his head toward the meeting upstairs.

"Bout an hour ago," Henri yelled back. Brady tilted his chin and stared at the ground, thinking. It wasn't his party without an invitation. He surveyed his team, anxiously awaiting his move, and twirled an index finger in the air while pulling a pair of gloves from his back pocket, signaling it would be work as usual.

Disappointed, they haltingly scattered as Brady walked to the battered foreman's metal desk directly beneath where Bud and the suit conspired. He flicked the mouse to light up the ancient desktop monitor and punched in "BTSITKA" followed by his password, "Imoretime", checking the day's run schedule, maintenance alerts, employee roster and his e-mail. Brady studied them with difficulty, distracted by the discussion occurring just 15 feet away. Nothing earth shattering – he would need to bring in someone to replace Sedge, who had called in sick again. He might also have to shift a line to cod, depending on what shipments arrived when. He reached for the phone to call Henri about the repairs on the delta conveyor, still logged as "nonoperational," but before he could lift the receiver off the wall, the yellow bulb right above it flashed. Anyone from anywhere in the cannery could have been calling, but Brady knew who this would be.

As he entered the conference room, a tall man, fit and confident in his trim buttoned pinstripe, smiled too pleasantly as he held out his arm. "Rick Fabrizio," he said, striding confidently into Brady's space and grasping his hand firmly, pumping twice.

"Brady Sitka," was the reply, uttered in a flat tone conveying neither fear nor challenge.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Sitka. Bud tells me you're the guy who keeps the trains running on time around here," the suit reported, smiling, never even glancing at Bud who remained seated, motionless, looking stricken. Hearing no reply, Fabrizio retained his Cheshire grin and motioned to the array of torn, misaligned roller chairs surrounding the equally dilapidated, stained and scratched wooden slab overfilling the conference room. "Have a seat, please."

Suddenly Brady had choices to make. He didn't want to sit by Bud for two reasons. First, although a nice enough guy, Bud was management and thus, at least nominally, beholden to the corporate owners Fabrizio represented. Second, that option would involve walking about as far away from the suit as possible, which might be interpreted as cowardice. More importantly, Brady didn't want to sit at all, having effectively been ordered to do so.

"Mr. ..., Fabrizio is it?"

"Yes," he confirmed, again with the perfect teeth.

"I'm not really interested in meeting with management unless our union rep is here." No apologies. No "I'm sure you understand." No request.

The smile, although still there, was less prominent. Fabrizio pulled back one of the chairs and leisurely settled into it, resting his arms on the tattered, foam leaking upholstery, legs spread apart confidently. "This isn't a union matter, Mr. Sitka."

Brady looked to Bud, still silent, staring back at him unhelpfully, pathetic, impudent.

Realizing Brady wasn't about to surrender his small patch of dirty carpet, Fabrizio pushed on. "When Consolidated bought this facility, it was our hope we could turn it around, use what you folks had going and improve on it."

“What do you mean, ‘turn it around?’” Brady interrupted. “We were doing just fine. We were making a profit. We still are – even more profit after you guys cut our wages over and over, killed our pension and shredded our health benes.”

“Mr. Sitka ...”

“Look, I told you, I’m not going to discuss anything without our union rep here.”

“Mr. Sitka ...”

“And if we are going to negotiate, we need to get it scheduled just like always, so everyone can be prepared. None of this ambush stuff.”

“Mr. Sitka, I am not here to negotiate, and as I said, this is not a union matter,” Fabrizio said calmly. His welcoming veneer had been replaced by a dispassionate expression, revealing nothing of his intent. “Please, have a seat.”

Brady’s instincts told him to walk out, to call the International Longshore and Warehouse local, and to let this sucker know he couldn’t do an end-round. His instincts damn sure told him not to sit on command. Yet, he really didn’t know why this guy was here. So, as a compromise, he stayed. He stood.

Fabrizio slowly exhaled his disappointment, and leaned forward to the accompanying squeaks of his chair. “Mr. Sitka, this morning at eight, Eastern time, Westport Cannery was placed into bankruptcy for purposes of liquidation. It became clear to Consolidated over time, especially during our most recent negotiations, that this business is just not viable.”

Brady heard the words, but did not quite accept the meaning. “If you’re trying to scare us into caving, we’ve been threatened before, and it’s not going to work. We’ve got nothing left to give you.”

“I’m not threatening you,” he continued, residue of the earlier smile returning. “I am informing you. The cannery will be closed in 10 days. We thought it would be easier for your people to hear this from their leader, before we officially notify everyone later today.”

Brady waited for more. There was none – nothing else to input – so his mind began to process. “*Closing?*” How can this place simply close? What about all the equipment, the building. “*Bankruptcy?*” A

place can't be broke if it's making money? What about our jobs? What about the negotiations? Bud's hapless demeanor now made sense – he would be out of work too.

Fabrizio stood, buttoning his jacket, marking the meeting's end. "It is important for the employees to know they will be paid for each day they work through the end of next week, but if too many decide to call in sick, we will close operations early – then no one gets paid anymore." He thanked Brady for his time and expected cooperation.

That was it. Swift, and incomprehensible. Brady spread word, offering no reassurances, instead promising his brethren a fight that never came. They too were in disbelief, and as the days ticked off, one by one, the fog of incredulity only thickened. It made no sense, but it was real, it was happening. In 10 days, the final horn echoed across the cannery, and the last shift left the floor – silent for the first time anyone could remember.

The ILWU lawyer had confirmed bankruptcy was the ultimate trump card. Consolidated's cadre of accountants and lawyers portrayed Westport as a liability, even though it made money each year. The magic of pension funding and depreciation costs and interest obligations and rising health care expenses and anticipated wage demands were cooked in a foul-smelling soup, such that an enduring business over a century in the making was made to seem a blight on Consolidated's books.

The bankruptcy judge needed little convincing anyway, and within months, the equipment had been sold to third-world outfits doing the same work at a fraction of the cost. The building was auctioned to a hotel chain for remodeling into a quaint riverfront inn, complete with charming black-and-white pictures of the old cannery in every hallway. The workers received their final paycheck, as promised, but not a dime more.

In the 17 months since, Brady found a few brief odd jobs, but not his dignity. The government long ago ended food and unemployment assistance programs in its effort to balance the federal budget, and so the four Sitkas lived from meal to meal, parceling off the family's meager lifetime possessions – a television, hiking gear, an old digital

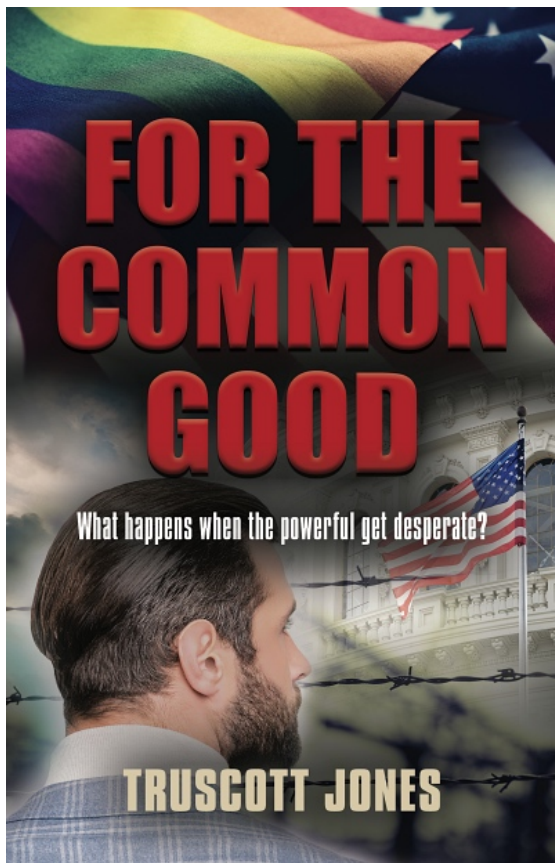
camera, a soccer ball, then a wheelbarrow, tools, cell phones and eventually, his two extra pairs of jeans.

When the provisions of the National Homeowners' Security Act kicked in, and the bank took their home with a week's notice on *anticipation* of a *possible* default, Brady's wife, with his blessing, moved back to Indiana with their teenage son and daughter, the threesome living off her parents' dwindling assets. He stayed with old work buddies for a while, a day here and two days there, but soon most of them had either fled the area or hit the streets as well. Now Brady too was a full-time nomad, sleeping in parks and abandoned schools and shuttered homes and warehouses. The daily meal was harder to come by with more and more competition for garbage bin edibles. Begging was pointless, as social mores had turned hard against such charity lest it encourage the lazy and slothful.

Brady had not communicated with his family in months. He owned no phone with which to place a call, had no funds to use an internet privatized by the Federal Communications Providers' Protection Act. He couldn't afford the large mailing fees required by AmeriPost, the old United States Postal Service's corporate successor.

His isolation was probably fortunate. Brady and his wife's last months together were all fights and tears and brutal anxiety. But at least she, and especially the kids, never saw his new depths of humiliation.

Another wave heaved over the former castle, then pulled back toward its dark source, grabbing chunks of wall and parapet and drawbridge, leaving only soaked protuberant ruins. Of even that, the wind and surf would soon leave no trace. Brady stepped around the perimeter of the faint remains, and walked on.



Senator Chaise Landon wants to change 2036 America, where being homosexual is worse than illegal - it's dangerous. Just one problem: when the corporate leaders and Christian Kingdom running the U.S. chose Landon, they didn't know he was himself gay.

For The Common Good

By Truscott Jones

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