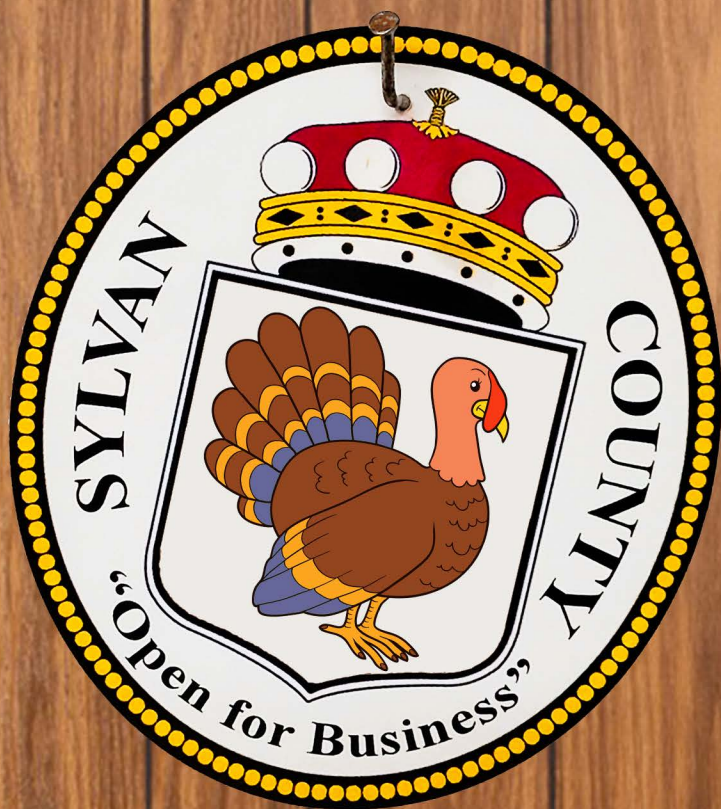


THE COUNCIL



A ~~NOTE~~ FROM
NOVEL

T.C. WEBER

The Council
By T. C. Weber

Inspired by real events

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Solstice Publishing - <http://www.solsticeempire.com/>

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To elected officials and government employees
everywhere, most of whom are thankfully more
competent than the characters in this book.

Chapter One

Luther

Luther Smith tensed involuntarily as the clock on the far wall of the Sylvan County Council chambers neared seven. Sitting at the long, curving council desk, reality hit him for the first time. *My first meeting! I'm an elected official!* Part of him wanted to leap up from his high leather chair behind the District 5 plaque and shout it for all to hear.

Except that would be vainglorious. Besides, he only had an audience of two. Even his colleagues hadn't arrived, only the meeting secretary at a small table below the raised council desk, playing a game on her smartphone. From the obnoxious neon colors, it looked like Candy Crash. Rounding out the gathering, an elderly white man in the front row paged through a rumpled newspaper.

Luther decided to introduce himself to the meeting secretary. "Luther Smith, District 5."

Dragging her eyes from her phone, the woman held out a hand. "Wanda Whatley. Welcome aboard." She sported a graying crew cut, thick-framed glasses, and a blue pants suit, and smelled like pencil shavings.

Right before seven, people trickled in. Luther's four colleagues and Joseph Duran, the legislative counsel, filed in through the door behind him and took their seats at the council desk. All were white—Luther was only the second black councilman in county history.

Unlike Luther, the other councilmen were veterans, most on their second term. Luther had just won a special election to replace Councilman Noogat, who'd been sentenced to five years for stealing campaign funds. It was subsequently revealed he'd spent the money on pectoral implants. The disgraced councilman was mounting a

lawsuit to retain his seat, claiming he could call in from prison. Noogat's name was still on the District 5 sign on the front of the desk, something Luther would have to correct.

Luther's district covered Middleton—the county's only actual city—and its immediate surroundings. No one had bothered gerrymandering the county council districts, unlike the Congressional districts, which resembled a Jackson Pollock painting.

District 4 Councilman Lionel Davis settled into the adjacent chair. He was about thirty-five, the second youngest on the council after Luther, and had dark gelled hair, long sideburns, and a thin mustache, along with a generous application of cologne that evoked thoughts of an old sea trunk.

Luther extended a hand. "Luther Smith."

Councilman Davis shook it with a firm grip. "Welcome aboard."

"Thank you." The job was only part-time, but Luther already worked full-time teaching chemistry and remedial science at Middleton High School. Which was why Luther had run for office—Middleton's schools were run by the county, and perpetually underfunded and ignored.

Councilman Davis leaned toward him and spoke quietly. "Don't worry about Noogat's lawsuit. The council's obliged to remove anyone who can't carry out their duties." His eyes gleamed. "We may have to remove the Executive too, if the old bastard's convicted."

County Executive Herman Grimes, the elected head of Sylvan County's executive branch, had been caught exposing himself in the community college library. After initially denying the whole thing, he was now claiming he'd inadvertently ingested a testosterone supplement instead of his daily statin.

"He should resign," Luther whispered. "And seek help."

Councilman Davis let out a huff. “He won’t. He’s got the ego of a pampered Chihuahua. Bad enough he won’t work with the council, now Sylvan County is the laughing stock of the state.”

Luther waved to the other councilpersons, who were beyond handshaking range. District 2 Councilman Clifton van Womple stared back and scratched his thinning white hair. Rather than return the wave, he turned to District 1 Councilwoman Joan Sutton, a middle-aged woman with big bushy hair and heavy makeup, and pointed at Luther. “Who’s that guy?”

Councilwoman Sutton rolled her overly mascaraed eyes. “Try reading a newspaper once in a while.”

Councilman van Womple made a *hmmph* noise, fluttering the white hairs protruding from his nostrils. “Newspapers are full of socialist propaganda. Instead of reading fake news, you should listen to ‘The Secret Truth’ on shortwave band 11555 kilohertz.”

Seated at the center of the desk, the District 3 Councilman and current council president, Sammy ‘Sparkles’ Sparks, extended an arm toward Luther. The president was probably the most unusual-looking man Luther had ever met. His head was shaped like an egg, with an exceptionally tall forehead emerging from a bushy red unibrow, parting a fringe of wispy hair, and converging to a peak. He wore a dated plaid suit and overly long tie.

Luther couldn’t reach the president’s extended hand with Davis in between, and had to get up to complete the shake.

“Welcome on board,” Sparks said. He leaned forward and peered at the sign in front of Luther’s chair. “You’re not Councilman Noogat in disguise, are you?”

Luther assumed he was joking, but his face looked serious. “No. Luther Smith. I won the special election.”

“Thought so. Just making sure. He’s supposed to be in jail.”

A raven-haired, bearded man in a dark pinstripe suit entered the main door, strode down the right aisle, and sat in the center of the front row. Shortly thereafter, a short, round-faced brunette, not much older than Luther's chemistry students, took a front seat next to the aisle and flipped open a steno pad. A thirty-something woman with olive skin and straight blonde hair took a seat at the back of the chamber.

Seven o'clock. There were at least a hundred chairs on the chamber floor, but only four were filled.

Council President Sparks brought down his gavel. Unfortunately, his eyes didn't leave the clock and the gavel hit the end of a pen, which catapulted into the air and bounced off the paneled wall behind the council desk.

Councilman Davis let out a quick bark of laughter. On the other side of the president, the legislative counsel attempted to conceal a smirk by busying himself in some papers. On the far end, Councilwoman Sutton shook her head and took a long sip from a metal water bottle, leaving behind a smear of red lipstick.

Without rising, Councilman Sparks scanned the floor for his pen. When he finally spotted it, he stretched out a leg to coax it within finger reach.

Resuming his composure, he again addressed the microphone. "This meeting of the Sylvan County Council is now in session."

"You didn't turn the microphone on," Councilwoman Sutton hissed with exasperation on her face.

Sparks nodded and fumbled for the switch. "Ah ha!" Microphone on, he repeated the call to order, then turned to the flag and led the pledge of allegiance.

Luther rose with the others, hand over heart, feeling the importance of each word: "...with liberty and justice for all."

The council president motioned for everyone to sit, then glanced at the agenda. "First, happy Mother Goose

Day. Next, is there anyone in the audience who would like to address the council on any item that's not on the printed agenda? If so, we ask that you state your name and address for the record and limit your statement to two minutes."

Luther leaned forward. *Let's see what our esteemed citizens have to say.*

The elderly man in the front row folded his newspaper and shuffled to the speaking lectern. He half-leaned on a customized cane that sported a rearview mirror, a bright red bulb, and a silvery flared horn. He squeezed the bulb as he walked, and the horn sounded. *Beepa-beepa! Beepa-beepa!*

The other councilmen rolled their eyes or ignored him.

The elderly man settled in front of the microphone and tapped it. "Is this thing on?" He placed the horn against the microphone and squeezed the bulb. *BEEPA-BEEPA!! BEEPA-BEEPA!!*

Everyone winced. Councilman Sparks covered his ears and shouted, "Yes, it's on. Please don't do that."

The man gripped the top of the lectern. "Mr. President. Esteemed Council. For the record, I am Alvin K. Bartlesnap of 1216 Foggybottom Lane, Farmette Haven."

Farmette Haven was one of the exurban communities in District 1, in the north part of the county.

Mr. Bartlesnap thrust a gnarled finger into the air. "I would like to comment on Ordinance O-27-17, which is on next month's agenda." He searched his pockets and pulled out a fistful of crumpled index cards and a pair of reading glasses. "I have studied this bill long and hard, and have several recommendations to make. But first, I'd like to discuss the history behind this issue, and how we've gotten where we are today. The roots of O-27-17 stretch back to the English Court of Chancery and the decline of the Exchequer..."

He rambled well beyond his allotted two minutes. Councilman van Womple's head tilted gradually forward and he began to snore. Councilwoman Sutton fixated on her smartphone.

Councilman Davis faced the meeting secretary and drew an index finger across his throat in a cutting motion. The secretary, who doubled as an audio technician, nodded and flipped a switch. Bartlesnap kept speaking but microphone off, he was harder to hear.

"Thank you, Mr. Bartlesnap," Councilman Sparks said. "Now, is there anyone else who wishes to speak?"

Mr. Bartlesnap seemed to get the hint and shuffled back to his seat.

Councilman Davis told Luther, "Bartlesnap's usually the only person who ever testifies, and he testifies on every single bill, whether or not he knows the first thing about it. Says it's his civic duty."

"Well," Luther said, "good for him." *Although I'll have to ask for his sources if he makes any odd claims.*

"In my first term," Davis said, "there was this other kook who demanded to see details of our contingency and preparatory planning in the event of a zombieapocalypse."

"As a joke?"

"No, he was serious. Dressed in camouflage fatigues and spouted the latest conspiracies from ZAnon. He moved away, thankfully—built a bunker in Saskatchewan, I heard."

"What's ZAnon?"

"Internet nutjobs who claim there's a secret plot by the 'Deep State' to create zombies and release them on the world, thereby bringing about a New World Order. Some of my constituents are followers—you can tell from the 'Z Truth Will Set U Free' signs in their yards."

The blonde woman in the back rose from her seat and approached the microphone, pale lips pressed together. She wore tan cargo pants and a green fleece. "Hello. I'm

Lisa Hogan and I live at 2355 Whistlestop Drive, Foxglove Estates.”

Foxgloves Estates was a suburban community in Davis’ district. Councilman Davis frowned, but didn’t say anything.

Ms. Hogan gestured toward Councilman van Womple. “Is he going to sleep through public testimony?”

The council president leaned into his mic. “Can someone please wake up Clifton?”

Councilwoman Sutton reached over and jostled van Womple awake. His eyes darted wildly. “Whaa...what’s happening?”

“According to their web site,” Ms. Hogan spoke into the mic, “Cha-Ching Properties, which owns half the land in the county, is planning to develop the Great Woods, our last sizable stand of forest. But that area is zoned for conservation. I came to ask if you know what’s going on here. You must, right?”

Luther hadn’t heard this before, but the Great Woods were way over on the west side of the county and this was his first meeting. The other councilpersons similarly responded with blank faces, except for Councilman Davis, who looked down and rustled through his papers.

Council President Sparks leaned toward his microphone. “Thank you.” He scanned the empty seats. “Anyone else?”

Ms. Hogan remained at the lectern. “I’m not finished.” She scrunched her face and ran fingers through limp hair. “It’s on Cha-Ching’s website—I try to follow what they’re up to. It’s listed as their next big project—The Preserve—an irritatingly ironic name since their sketch map shows houses, stores, and office buildings instead of unbroken forest. You know nothing about it? They haven’t submitted anything or contacted you?”

Sparks looked around at the other council members. Councilwoman Sutton shrugged. Councilman van Womple's eyelids drifted slowly down again.

Luther decided to find out more. "Did you contact the Planning Department?"

"They said they had nothing on file."

"Did you contact the developer?"

Ms. Hogan's eyes narrowed. "They refused to talk to me and don't respond to emails."

"Development projects have to be approved by the Planning Department, so keep calling them."

"It would be nice if the county posted proposed projects on their web site like other counties do."

Councilman Davis cut in before Luther could respond. "I'll pass that along. Thank you."

The woman sighed and marched back to her seat.

The council president shuffled through a pile of papers. "And now we'll take up our first order of business. Let me see if I can find it..."

Davis responded, "It's on the agenda. We're honoring Boy Scout Troop 1156 for um...?" He looked at the others for help.

"Oh yes," Sparks said. "Where are they?"

There was no sign of boy scouts in the chamber.

Davis looked around. "Did anyone send them an invite?"

Shrugs all around.

Sparks frowned. "Well, someone find out where they are."

The meeting secretary closed the Candy Crash game on her smartphone and began scrolling through contacts.

"This is important," Sparks said. "It's important to honor the troops."

The troops? Luther wondered if he'd misheard.

“I was there on 9-11,” Sparks continued. “Saw the towers come down. Right there on my TV. And then I had brunch. Waffles, I think.”

“Great meeting!” Luther told his colleagues.

It was over so fast. Only one person had testified on bills, the old man with the horn and rearview mirror on his cane. One new bill had been introduced, by Council President Sparks, a resolution making bear claws the official pastry of Sylvan County. The council had also passed a bill on final reader—the last step in its journey—to correct some unfortunate punctuation errors in county code with obscene implications. The Scouts were delayed to a future meeting since no one was present to receive the accolade, for, well, no one was sure what it was for.

Councilman Davis walked over to Councilman van Womple’s seat and shook him awake. “Meeting’s over.”

Councilman van Womple started, blinked and rubbed his eyes. “Wha...er...ahem!”

“Time to go home.”

Luther stowed his All-In-One Binder in the leather attaché case his father had given him for college. He asked the meeting secretary, Ms. Whatley, “Can you, or someone else, change the sign at my seat? It still reads Nick Noogat.”

She nodded. “Of course. I’ll handle it.”

“Thank you!” *It’s nice to be surrounded by helpful people.*

As Luther headed to the council chambers exit, the bearded man in the front row approached. His pale face was lined around the eyes, but his slicked-back hair was as black as a new tire. His beard was narrow and pointy, and his mustache was shaped like an anchor. His tie had little silhouettes of men golfing.

The man held out a hand. "Sam Vassago. Welcome aboard."

Luther shook his hand. "Luther Smith, District 5. Pleased to meet you. Are you with the county, or...?"

Vassago smacked his lips. "I'm not a county employee, but I have its best interests at heart." He reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew a small rectangular silver case. From within, he handed Luther an embossed business card reading, 'Samuel Vassago, President. Vassago, Vassago & Hunter.'

As Luther tucked the card in his shirt pocket, Mr. Vassago said, "I've been following you."

Luther froze. "You have?" *I don't recognize him. He must be pretty good at following people without being detected.* "Why? Did I do something?"

"Not yet, but this is only your first day on the council."

"So, you're following me proactively?"

Mr. Vassago raised an eyebrow, then an index finger. "Ever since you ran for the special election. The other candidate didn't do as he was told—didn't knock on doors or sign wave like you did. Laziest S.O.B. I've met in my life, and that's saying a lot in this county."

"Or maybe voters preferred my platform." Luther had pledged to increase school funding to hire more teachers, increase their salaries, replace the 'mobile modular learning units' with real classrooms, and repair all the leaky bathrooms. His fellow teachers, the students, their parents, the school board, and even Principal Hodge had supported his campaign enthusiastically, and he'd won by a wide margin. Admittedly, the other candidate had made the race easy. He hadn't even shown up to the debates, and even the most unsure neophyte could out-debate an empty chair.

“What does your company do?” Luther resumed, wondering if this man were a private detective of some kind.

“We’re a full-service legal firm. Come by our offices some time—we’re right across the street. I’ll give you a tour.”

“Oh, you’re a lawyer.”

“Land use attorney. The firm handles criminal cases too, but that’s not my bailiwick.” Mr. Vassago put a hand on Luther’s shoulder. “You’ve got an enthusiastic base.”

“Well, I’d been fighting for better school funding and complaining about apathy on the council. The teachers and students encouraged me to run, and the parents picked up on it too.”

“Truly exceptional.” Mr. Vassago patted Luther’s shoulder. “Bona-fide political enthusiasm in this county is rarer than originality at a Nickelsack show.”

Although Vassago seemed nice, and Luther agreed about Nickelsack, he began to sidle away. *What would an attorney want with me?* “I promised to increase school funding and get the bathrooms working again. Those are my top priorities.” He’d written the Board of Education and the County Executive the day after he was elected, hoping to jump start the issue.

“A worthy cause. And if you succeed—have you thought about higher office next election?”

Already? “I’m here to help my constituents and the county as a whole. I wasn’t planning on a career in politics.”

“You can do even more for your constituents in the state assembly. Bring state funding to Middleton. They’ve got deeper pockets than the county. Then, if you play your cards right, Congress down the road. I can help you get there.”

Luther couldn’t imagine himself in Congress. As for the state assembly, maybe something to consider down the

road, but not after his first day on the county council. “Um, thanks. I’d better get going. Early day tomorrow.” He had to be at the school by seven, before the students arrived.

Vassago made an ‘okay’ sign. “Well, it was good to meet you. I’ll be in touch. We should lunch.”

Councilwoman Sutton passed them on her way out. She focused glassy eyes on them and smirked.