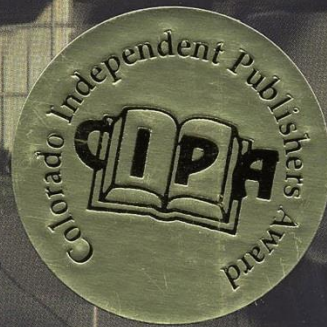


A novel of evil, redemption, and exploding chili

The Day the EPA Went Down

Environmental Protection Agency Region XI



Lucian Wurhmuwhd

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Contents

Chapter 1	Challenge	1
Chapter 2	Revenge	15
Chapter 3	Asinine	21
Chapter 4	Bad Tree Day	28
Chapter 5	Gas	32
Chapter 6	Jammed	39
Chapter 7	Acronyms	42
Chapter 8	VP Memo	49
Chapter 9	Orders	55
Chapter 10	Reamed	62
Chapter 11	GETEM	64
Chapter 12	X Marks the Spot	72
Chapter 13	OWL	74
Chapter 14	Blanks	80
Chapter 15	DRINKUP	83
Chapter 16	Reverse	91
Chapter 17	Baer Fur	93
Chapter 18	Explosive Issue	100
Chapter 19	Booby Hatch	103
Chapter 20	Testing One, Two, Three	108
Chapter 21	Minerals	110
Chapter 22	Rigged	113
Chapter 23	Whale	115
Chapter 24	Crusade	122
Chapter 25	Final Solution	124
Chapter 26	TDTEPAWD	135
	Epilogue	140

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Chapter 1

Challenge

Like a drummer at the guillotine Joseph Toler, a pencil in each hand, tapped the legal pad on his desk slowly. He pondered what he could possibly say to the employees of Environmental Protection Agency - Region XI about the budget blood bath taking place in Washington.

On the pad he jotted *LAYOFFS*.

Quickly he crossed it off.

Would federal employees even understand the word layoff?

He jotted *RIF*.

It had a much nicer sound to it.

In a flash Joseph Toler, Deputy Assistant Regional Director for Hazardous Waste Management Division Regulations Section, was again drummer for his college band, The Cosmic Raisin, and he was wowing them with his Gene Krupa impression. He always felt he did the drum solo in Sing, Sing, Sing as well as Krupa ever did. Too bad the Cosmic Raisin so quickly moved on to rock music.

Joe's riff on the legal pad became so furious that a crowd began to form around his office door. When he became aware of them, he stopped drumming, waved them away, and crossed off *RIF*.

Reduction in force? he thought. Impossible! Every cell in the body of this career federal employee shuddered at the idea. Government was about growing, not about shrinking. A shrinking government is a dying government.

DOWN SIZING

RIGHT SIZING

He Xed out these two current business terms as quickly as he wrote them.

Anger swelled up in him, righteous anger, anger aimed at the injustice of it all. It was his duty, his destiny even, to save the day. Being a positive thinker (at least his twenty years of government service had not squeezed that out of him), he searched his mind for ways to get through this crisis and come out of it even better off. In every adversity, he reminded himself, are the seeds of opportunity.

How, he thought, can I motivate my employees? How can I make them understand the gravity of this situation and yet help them see it as an opportunity, that just carping and complaining and declaiming and denouncing will accomplish nothing? How can I recapture the feeling of hope we all had just two years ago when the president was elected and with a distinguished environmentalist vice-president .? How can I turn their thoughts from worry about survival to ways to thrive?

He began mentally rehearsing the words he would say to his employees: 'The new Congress has turned hostile and is coming at us like Freddy Kruger. It is cutting away everyone in its path with a large budget knife.'

That would be a good way to begin but not very positive. How, oh how, do I steer them in a positive direction? How do I get them to focus on something other than the budget cuts? How could the Congress do this? All these Republicans ever think about is how to make things cozier for business?

He realized his thinking was taking a decidedly negative, self-pitying turn.

To snap himself out of it, he once again became Gene Krupa at Carnegie Hall slowing banging out the first beats of his Sing, Sing, Sing solo until once again he was banging on the pad for all he was worth. He felt the energy surge through his body and soul. As he reached the climax of his solo he could hear Harry James's trumpet pulling the rest of the band back into the piece.

He got so excited he had to call on one of his other loves, meditation, to calm himself back down.

He dropped the pencils that had become drum sticks.

He breathed deeply.

Slowly inhale.

Slowly exhale.

One, two, three times he allowed the atmosphere to breathe for him. No longer was his body the actor in this life giving drama. It was the air itself that moved into his lungs and caressed his soul.

Soon his martial arts discipline took over, and he began thinking deflective rather than attacking thoughts.

“Business, of course, we've got to model ourselves on business, use business points of view, use business terminology, make the Congress think of us as just another business, then they will give us our due. Deflect the blow they've aimed at us and make it work for us.”

With a flourish he doodled the word BUSINESS on the pad and tossed both pencils across the room.

He visualized the final S in BUSINESS knocking down Congress with a fluid karate kick. He saw the opponent drop before he knew what had hit him.

“Ahhh, Sensei, would be proud!” he hissed loudly.

Charles Edgerly, who was just shuffling past the office door, actually turned his head slightly to see what was going on in there.

Joe grabbed two more pencils from the EPA Tenth Anniversary mug next to his name plate and did a drum roll on the legal pad. He dropped the pencils and jumped up like Archimedes from his bath, grabbed the pad, and with an air of confidence he had not felt in years strode down the hall to meet with his employees.

As he walked into the the Snail Darter Room at precisely 10:00 o'clock, the announced time of the staff meeting, only Charles Edgerly, cradling his coffee cup like a beloved pet, was seated and ready for the meeting.

Because he had gained new insights and a new enthusiasm, Toler hoped that things would be different. Of course he should have known better. The day Archimedes discovered the law of displacement, the thinkers in the agora, pondering theories of reality instead of exploring how the world really works, probably had no clue what a momentous discovery had been made either. It always bothered Toler that life just went on hour by hour, sun rise by sun rise, season by season, no matter what wars, funerals or seductions were happening.

At about 10:15 the Region XI staff began shuffling in. Each dropped into the same seat he always dropped into. They buzzed about the headline that had appeared in the Great Western Chronicle:

SPEAKER SUGGESTS EPA EXPENDABLE

Hostile Environment for EPA in D C

The custom of the Agency dictated that those who were not present at any gathering were somehow more important than those who were. According to this time honored custom, anyone who arrived on time was made to wait until the late-comers arrived. Thus, because of the constant striving among the employees for status and seniority, meetings were starting later and later, the operative principle being, "He/she who arrives last wins." In fact, the greatest politeness ever shown by one Region XI employee to another always took place between the last two to arrive as they stepped aside for each other to enter the room.

Usually it was Katrina Fussbrachen and Mark Furer who stood like Alphonse and Gaston waving each other through the door until whoever was conducting the meeting had to insist that each enter and take his place. This in itself, of course, accomplished what each had hoped for - everyone noticing their arrival.

Charles Edgerly, however, always arrived first and on time because he really didn't care who thought he was important just as long as he had his coffee.

When all had finally assembled at 10:35, Toler began.

"Ladies and gentlemen."

The very moment the words slipped passed his lips he knew he had made an egregious error. Quickly his brain processed alternatives to this phrase with the speed that only the human brain can achieve in the brief interval it took him to say, "Um, excuse me."

To begin again his bio-computer considered and rejected "Women and guys" among other alternatives and was just about to settle on "My fellow employees" when his built in censor whispered in his ears that "fellow" probably carried a sexist connotation. Several other possibilities zipped through his brain at astronomical speeds, among them "My fellow persons". Toler, was flustered by the icy stare covering Katrina's face.

Correcting his language was the one area of personal development Joseph Toler was

continually working on, and the only area of human interaction he did not feel he had yet mastered. And Katrina was always ready to remind him of that fact.

Those who were paying attention, however, picked up immediately that something important was about to be said. Toler being the egalitarian he was, the words ladies and gentlemen had never passed Joseph Toler's lips that anyone could remember.

Mark "Sarge" Furer and Katrina Fussbrachen interrupted at the same time.

"Chief, I've got a really important announcement to make." Mark prevailed through the sheer power of volume. Katrina's whine could not compete with his drill sergeant's megaphone voice.

Before Toler could cut him off, Sarge launched into his announcement.

"I've got great news to share with you. I just learned we have a conviction in the spotted owl killing."

The room erupted in applause. Everyone was elated at the news, but even more were they relieved that Sarge had not begun another of his tirades about the explosion in the microwave oven.

Toler cut Sarge off with uncharacteristic sarcasm.

"Mark, if God had wanted you to give us the details at this meeting, He would not have given us copy machines and trees to make paper from. Put the details in a memo."

When Toler saw the icicles in Katrina Fussbrachen's eyes lengthening, he wished he could take back these words too and rephrase his remark.

"Puhleeze, Mr. Toler. If you wish to think of your higher power as a god, that is your business, but don't impose those views on us. And He, Mister Toler! My Gawd!"

"Thank you for reminding me," Toler replied, reverting to the even tempered persona he was careful to project most of the time. But Katrina got in the last shot.

“And ‘Ladies and Gentlemen’, Mister Toler!”

I wonder why she didn’t call me Tolerperson, flashed through Toler’s mind.

“We must get back to the reason I called this meeting.”

Toler insisted on brevity at staff meetings. He would listen for as long anyone wanted to talk one on one, but he disliked intensely wasting the time of several people at a meeting. It had nothing to do with making meetings brief; rather It had to do with the number of meetings they all had to attend.

He said simply, “Administrator Blackpaw has a matter of extreme urgency to discuss with you.”

Simon Blackpaw, though a man of great intelligence, had not had most of the advantages of men who rise to high positions in government or business. Though a hard and diligent worker, a personable man in social settings, and a brilliant writer, the one area of communication he did not excel in was speaking before a group. In this he was not unusual among Americans. It has been verified by survey after survey that the vast majority of Americans would rather not speak in public, in fact, the fear of public speaking is the number one fear of Americans, even greater than the fear of death.

Simon Blackpaw was no exception. As he rose his mouth dried up and his stomach tightened. In most settings, as a high government official, he could carefully compose what he had to say and memorize it if there were sufficient time or, at the very least, he could read what he had written. These alternatives made public speaking tolerable because it gave him the opportunity to craft precision into his language. But on occasions such as today when he to speak on short notice, the big fear came back.

This fear had its roots in his grade school days on the reservation. He had had a mean spirited teacher, one of those individuals who slip through the bureaucratic cracks and obtain

positions which allow them to do exactly the opposite of what the job is meant to accomplish. This teacher loved to humiliate her charges and make them never forget that they were inferior human beings because of their race and heritage. As a result, whenever Simon Blackpaw spoke up in class, he was berated by this teacher for any inaccuracy, whether in the answer to an arithmetic problem or a recitation about history.

This experience proved to be a two edged sword for Simon. At one level it motivated him to work hard to accomplish great things so he could prove the teacher wrong, but it also instilled in him a fear of speaking in public when he could not be absolutely sure of every word he was to speak.

He began.

“Uh guys, we sortta got a little uhm problem that we need to kinda talk about today. You see, Congress has, well, they’ve suggested, well not exactly suggested but really told us that we have to cut some budgets.”

Region XI being the democracy it is, he explained to them in halting uhm-filled speech that they were now a committee of the whole (what he actually said was that they “kinda had to all act together”) to see where they could save money.

Joseph Toler stepped in and rescued him.

“Friends,” he interrupted - no longer were there any ladies and gentlemen in the room- “We’ve have got to begin changing our thinking. We’ve got to change the way we see ourselves if we are going to survive. It looks like we’re going to have to, God forbid - sorry Katrina - learn how to justify our existence.

“We have done a good job at what we do best. We have used our budgets wisely to fulfill the mandate given to us by the people through their elected representatives.” Like so many in the bureaucracy, Toler had developed a Them-Them-Us philosophy. There were the

employees of the agency with their sacred trust. There were those who for some strange reason had the power to interfere with that sacred trust - the elected representatives of the people. And then there was The People itself, that environment wrecking mob that ranked in contempt just above government contractors.

The key to keeping that sacred trust is, of course, making sure that all budgets are depleted by the end of the fiscal year so there is justification for making them bigger the next year. There is no word heard spoken more frequently, nor any word more frequently written in any federal government office than budget . For a federal bureaucrat it is the mantra. Not nearly as melodious as nor as simple as OM , but then nothing done by government is as melodious or as simple as it might be. But for a federal manager at any level to sit and contemplate that one word is no different than for a monk high on a mountain ledge in Tibet to chant his mantra. Two simple syllables - bud jet. Ah, but what a fine word they form. Like a bud in spring, the smallest budget request can grow to be an enormous flower; and the money can fly away as fast as the SST. A mixed metaphor to be sure and one that makes little sense, but that's why it's perfect - it perfectly reflects the federal budgeting process.

“We have,” Toler went on, “through the legislation that created us, the ability to make regulations and rules to fulfill that mandate. And we have used this rule making power wisely. Included in that power is the ability to levy fines for violations. In view of the recent changes in Washington, I believe it is time we take those powers we now have, while there is still time, and use them to our advantage to show the new powers-that-be that we can be self sufficient. In other words, we need to become like the businesses we regulate. We need to become proactive. We need to operate in a way to show a profit.”

The room became as silent as a predawn desert. In unison the stunned employees of Region XI gasped. The shock was no less than if he had told them the Agency was to be shut

down. For the branch chief even to allow a word like profit to pass his lips had the same effect as would the First Lady passing gas at a Rose Garden reception. How could he even think of such a thing, thought the collective consciousness of this room full of bureaucrats. Their collective unconscious knew instinctively that their collective mission in life was to destroy the profit motive. How could Toler even think of such a thing.

Chris Fletcher paled and felt nauseous.

Katrina Fussbrachen gasped, "Puleeze, Mr. Toler"

"Say it ain't true, Joe," Conrad Mann muttered as he slowly shook his head.

Charles Edgerly's head moved almost imperceptibly from side to side.

The effect could not have been different if each had been the Pope and God had just asked him to move to Salt Lake City.

Jeremy Tinker, however, perceived the subtlety of what Joseph Toler was saying. As an engineer, Jeremy tended to see black and white lines, but he also saw black and white lines as solutions to problems. And if nothing else an engineer has to be practical; he has to make material and situations work for him. For instance, to build a bridge you have to make the natural stresses work for you to give the bridge strength. He saw immediately what Toler was doing. He was proposing that they use the natural stress of the situation to make their position stronger.

T. Markum Abernathy failed to see anything innovative in what Toler had said. It was obvious to Abernathy, a CPA, that Toler had merely described what has always been in government.

The silence, except for Katrina's gasp and Conrad Mann's mutterance, lasted for about thirty seconds, perhaps the longest period of silence in an EPA Region XI meeting room since the Agency's doors had first opened. Then a negative murmur rippled through the group.

“Wait! hear me out,” Joseph Toler said. “I give you each two challenges today.

“The first, and more significant, is to scrutinize every facet of American life to see how we can come up with viable new regulations that will form a revenue base for the Agency. More about that later.

“The second is to scrutinize every facet of our expenses so we can make small but visible cuts that will demonstrate to the Congress that we are sincere in our efforts to utilize our budgets fully while operating economically.

“So we’re just going to brain storm today to get the budget cutting thinking process started.”

T. Markam Abernathy could feel tears of admiration forming in his eyes at the brilliance of Toler’s thinking. No wonder Toler was rising so quickly in government service. To actually propose cutting budgets in order to raise them. Abernathy’s hobby, avocation really, was raising fruit for wine making, grapes, currants, chokecherries, so for him the metaphor that came to mind was pruning. The way you get a fruit tree or vine to grow more vigorously and produce more fruit is to prune it.

Brilliant! He thought.

“So let’s review the rules for brainstorming.” Toler went on. “Any idea is considered. No idea is stupid. And we only list ideas; we don’t discuss them. Katrina will you please come up front and write the ideas on the flip chart as they are presented, and Christian will you please hang the full sheets on the walls for us.”

Both Katrina and Christian rolled their eyes. She was always picked to do this task since, in her many years as a student, she had mastered the ability to write quickly and neatly at the same time. And Christian was always picked to hang the charts because, at six nine, he was the tallest, and this group took literally that no idea is stupid so they needed every bit of wall space.

Katrina viewed the task as secretarial, and being a secretary was an image she was trying to get away from. That's why she had been a perpetual student all these years. Whenever a new job was posted she would begin taking courses for it. As a result she never completed a whole program but had several hundred hours of college courses on her transcript. If they had all been in the same field she would have two bachelors degrees, a master's, a Ph D., and post doctoral studies. As it was, she had taken several sips from the Pierian Spring but never gulped enough to slake her thirst which was, of course, not really for knowledge but for a longer personal data sheet and a hoped for richer retirement.

Chris Fletcher had no such ambitions. He was just tall. And he felt that his being asked to pin up the brainstorming sheets was just another example of how the system exploited resources available to it simply because they are there. Somewhere in the back of his brain an image flashed, and he saw himself on a picket line made up of only people who were over six and a half feet tall protesting how they are always taken advantage of to hang up brainstorm sheets, reach objects off shelves, and lift small children to see parades. He saw a diverse group on his picket line. He saw for instance a sign that read

Gay, Tall, & Proud

and another that read

I'm Tall and I vote

And another

The weather's great up here!

How's it down there, Shrimp?

He heard a speech by a former NBA star decrying the exploitation by greedy capitalists

of seven footers. And most gratifying of all, he saw many members of People of Lesser Statured Individuals (a group that had been born as the Brotherhood of Short Folks at the University of Michigan in 1967, but who had changed their name in 1989 to eliminate the offensive language of their original title) walking in solidarity with their height advantaged comrades.

“Mister Fletcher, are you going to help us out?” Toler said gently bringing Chris back from his reverie.

Chris wanted to shout back angrily that he was not going to be exploited any more, that he was just a victim of his heightedness, but being the team player he was, he shrugged and said, “Sure.” He would save his indignation for bigger issues.

“Okay people, Let’s just get at it. How can we save money? Let’s start with little things. Remember we’re just brainstorming.”

“How about if we eliminate, or at least cut back on the monthly cash incentive awards to employees,” came from the left side of the room.

Katrina had written only the word cut on the flip chart when a loud “BOOO” went up from the group.

“That’s the stupidest idea I’ve ever heard,” came from the other side of the room.

“Go home!” shouted another.

“Obviously he never wins an award”, Sam Nunder in the front row whispered out of the side of his mouth to Jill Trocksley.

“Just put it down,” Joseph instructed Katrina.

Six hours later the walls of the meeting room were covered with flip chart pages filled with Katrina’s neat printing, and Christian Fletcher stood holding the last sheet up because they had run out of tape. The ideas ranged from more closely monitoring the dispensing of office

supplies from the supply room to enforcing the maximum 10 copy rule at all Xerox machines, (They were not all Xerox machines, of course; there were Sharps and Toshibas and lesser know brands, the result of whoever came in with the low bid, or who happened to be a minority business, at the time of each copy machine expansion.), to eliminating computer support personnel.

The latter idea caught the attention of the meeting. Everyone seemed to agree that they now had something to work on. Of course, there were no computer support people there because they were all, (dare I use such an obscenity so early on the narrative) contractors.

The last two hours of the meeting (actually now officially called a retreat, even though it was not being held in a remote location, since it had gone past the one hour for a meeting and three hours for a mini-conference, and for budget reporting purposes had to be called a retreat so that the funds could be properly allocated for the time spend by each employee) were devoted to discussing this idea. Oral Schurmeister, who also was a member of his township council and had aspirations for county office, gave an impassioned speech about the merits of the idea, pointing out that they never seemed to be able to get computer support any way, that government had functioned quite well, thank you, long before there were computers, that there could even be a reduction in the incidence of carpel tunnel syndrome among non-governmentally employed retirees (CTSANGER, referring to paid volunteers over fifty-five in the agency, pronounced cat's anger (Yes, dear reader, the narrator is well aware that paid and volunteer seem to be an oxymoron. Here, of course, such constructions are not used as figures of speech, but merely as descriptions of reality in a federal office. Let's face it; if the term oxymoron did not exist we would have to coin it to describe what goes on throughout the government everywhere every day.) .

In the end, that proposal to eliminate computer support personnel, along with some minor

ones, came to be adopted. The Region subsequently canceled its contract with Jackson Ongoing Computer Support (JOCS). It turned out to be a good thing that they did not eliminate the monthly awards to employees because as more and more problems with their computers occurred, employees were forced to put in more and more effort to get their work done and deserved a “Thank you for hanging in there.”

Indeed, at the end of the fiscal year, each employee received a walnut plaque with a brass plate on which were engraved his name and

IN RECOGNITION FOR HANGING IN THERE
ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY
DUE TO CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND CONTROL
THIS AWARD IS MADE TO

(NAME)

The total cost of the plaques was just short of the yearly salary of one of the contractors who had been let go. So at the next audit the GAO considered it a net gain.

In fact, the situation got so bad that the Agency was forced to hire nineteen new clerks to handle the work that down computers could no longer handle. The net result was that personnel expenses rose by 8% during the next quarter. The savings from canceling JOCS’ contract amounted to 2%. The Region itself won an award under the Budget Restraint Act just recently passed by Congress, and each employee received a nice bonus at the end of the quarter. It was not called a bonus, of course; it was called instead an Award for Service Above and Beyond in keeping with the theme of the plaques that had been awarded earlier.

In the following session of Congress the region's budget was increased by 25% to cover the costs associated with eliminating the computer support contractors and to fund the additional staff that became necessary as the situation worsened. Once again government had done what it does best - solve a problem by creating a bigger problem that can then be addressed by throwing more money at it.

At the time Toler, of course, had no way of knowing just how successful this brainstorming session would become. But he had a feeling. He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes to five. He looked around at the walls filled with ideas and at the tables filled with empty pizza boxes. He could justify pizzas being paid for by the tax payers because the meeting had turned into a retreat.

Just before he dismissed the attendees, Toler thanked everyone present and reminded them about the most important task at hand, the devising of new regulations.

“With the proper regulations in place,” he went on, “we can collect more fines to help finance the Agency's operations. In return I predict two things will happen. First, Congress will see how valuable we are because of our results and because we will be operating within their philosophy. Why, they might even consider making us a semi-private organization like the post office.”

Joe knew that was really too much to hope for, although the idea had some appeal, but he felt he had to rally the troops somehow. Through his dark side flashed a thought: My God, I wonder if we'll start shooting each other.

“Second, the more results we show, the more the Congress will be inclined to raise our budget.” He said raise our budget in a hushed tone that conveyed both cunning and reverence.

He paused for effect.

“We shall fight them in the rivers. We shall fight them in the dirty skies. We shall fight

them in the smoke stacks. We shall fight them wherever God's creation is threatened.”

Katrina's glare stopped him. He had wanted to parallel Churchill's famous speech, but he could not remember how many *we shall* Churchill had used anyway.

“And we shall meet here on Wednesday at 10:00. I expect you all to be on time because we shall begin promptly at 10:00. At that time, I shall announce the nature of awards to be given for the best suggestions for enforceable regulations.”

Never had so many shalls been spoken to such little effect.

The employees, exhausted by the length of the meeting, dumbfounded by Toler's vision of a business-like agency, and angry at the personal attacks and jeering made during the brainstorming, rushed out of the Snail Darter Room to catch their buses or hop on their bicycles for the ride home.

T. Markham Abernathy walked slowly. He knew his limousine was waiting.

That night, Joseph Toler, Ed.D, Ph.D (psychology), and Branch Chief EPA Region XI, had a nightmare in which he saw workmen remove his office door with its plastic laminated name plaque and replace it with a heavy oak door with a wavy glass window on which was printed in gold leaf: Joseph Toler, CEO.

The little we know about the author, Lucian Wurhmwuhd

Rumor has it that Lucian Wurhmwuhd is living under an assumed identity somewhere in the midwest teaching at a small public university under the name Lucy Whurlwind. Although he is now in his seventies, a confirmed bachelor, and as far as he knows childless he has never lost his passion for teaching. He has always been a stickler for the proper use of pronouns, a trait which has gotten him in trouble in the academic world. (In his last position before his current assignment he was fired when a student sought crisis counseling after Wurhmwuhd marked her down for insisting that *they* should always be used when a male was referenced and for refusing to even believe that the object of a sentence, clause, or prepositional phrase should be him and me not he and I.) This incident proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back; Wurhmwuhd had already been in trouble with his fellow faculty members for insisting that his Survey of English Literature class include works written before 1999 and even more egregious that he insisted his students read some Chaucer and Shakespeare.

The fact of his stickleriness (sic) about pronouns has also caused him no little personal anguish as he has changed his own personal pronoun from he/him to she/ her. Thus his identification as Lucy Whurlwind. Although he has not taken steps to physically become a woman, he has taken to identifying himself/herself/itself as a woman, sort of. It's just the modern version of "publish or perish" which for him/her/it has become gender-identify or perish. (He has, in his love for punning, resisted using the term Jenner-identify). He made this change simply so he could continue to teach at the university level. His gender studies class - Who the hell am I and what the hell am I doing here? Gender Identification in the age of Choice - Is one of the most popular electives on campus (other than gender election itself).

Because she, nee he, does not want to be identified any further he has decided to leave his former life buried in the archives of various universities where he obtained degrees and taught. Suffice it to say he is content at last - until someone finds him out and he has to make another transformation.

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