

“GOING NEGATIVE” by Alexander Lee-Rekers (StageMilk, 2024)

Late night in the campaign offices of Wendy Brewer, mayoral candidate. Advisors TARA, QUENTIN and TIM wait for their boss. QUENTIN paces, TIM listens to a message on his phone and TARA is seated behind Wendy’s desk in a large leather chair.

TARA: She’s not going to do it.

QUENTIN: She has to.

TARA: She’s not going to be the first to go negative.

QUENTIN: There’s merit if she does.

TARA: I understand that, Quentin. There’s also merit to her leaving it as late as possible.

TIM: *(On phone.)* Thank you.

TIM hangs up.

QUENTIN: Are you worried she won’t be able to go negative?

TARA: No, I know she can do it.

QUENTIN: But you’d rather she didn’t. See: you can’t bring that in here. She needs to be tough and, I’m sorry Tara, she needs to be able to disappoint you from time to time.

TIM: It’s not our call anyway. *(TIM checks his phone.)* She’s coming up now. Would you like to vacate her seat?

TARA moves.

TARA: It’s not about what I want.

QUENTIN: Remember that, please.

WENDY enters, and her staff mumble their greetings as she takes her seat.

WENDY: Where is everybody?

TIM: We sent them home.

WENDY: That’s fairly ominous.

TIM: It’s nothing bad, Wendy. Not for you.

TIM looks at QUENTIN, who nods and steps forward.

QUENTIN: This afternoon we received a call for comment about a video that's been circulating.

WENDY: Have we seen it?

QUENTIN: Not yet.

WENDY: Who has it?

QUENTIN: The Chronicle. Apparently, it shows Chuck dressing down the swim instructor at his son's school.

TARA: There's allegedly some ... fairly charged language.

WENDY: Is that code for what I think it is?

TARA: Bear in mind we haven't seen the video. And so we couldn't comment on the story if we wanted to.

QUENTIN: But it does raise the question: do we use it once the story breaks?

WENDY thinks.

WENDY: Tara?

TARA: Don't do it. Don't be the first. This video could derail Chuck's campaign completely. There's nothing to achieve here that won't feel opportunistic.

QUENTIN: Not if what he says offends her values, which it sounds like it will.

WENDY: I'm still in the room, Quentin.

QUENTIN: Yes, ma'am.

TARA: We also have no way of knowing if it's real. If it turns out to be fake, or a misunderstanding, we end up looking like we took the cheap shot and missed.

QUENTIN: Obviously we don't act if we can't confirm it.

TARA: Wendy? You have run a clean campaign: a campaign of ideas. It's everything we've talked about from the beginning.

QUENTIN: She's right: I agree with Tara that it's gotten you this far. But it won't get you to the finish line. Not against Chuck, who would do the same to you in a *second* if the situation was reversed.

Pause.

WENDY: Tim?

TIM: I'm waiting on a call back from Angela at the Chronicle. She could confirm there was a video sent to the paper, but not what its contents were.

QUENTIN: Can we get a copy?

TIM: It's on its way. *(To WENDY.)* We're going to watch it and advise you accordingly. That way if anything untoward comes up you've never seen it directly. Tara's right to be cautious.

WENDY: I shouldn't comment on something I haven't seen.

TIM: And you won't. You'll deflect when asked. We'll do the rest.

WENDY: If it's as bad as we think-

TARA: We are talking about an unconfirmed video that none of us have seen...

TIM: We'll see it soon enough.

TARA: Of course Chuck would use it if the situation was reversed. Doesn't that tell you everything you need to know about this course of action?

QUENTIN: Wendy? This is the election: here, tonight. You don't need this video to win. But you will win if you use it.

TIM: He's not wrong. *(TIM's phone buzzes. He takes it out and looks at it.)* It's come through. Let's go into the kitchen and take a look.

TIM exits, followed by QUENTIN.

WENDY: Are you all right?

TARA: I'm fine. Quentin's smart. Tim, he's a legend, you're right to listen to him.

WENDY: I listen to you too, Tara. *(Short pause.)* Are you going to watch the video?

TARA really does try to leave the room, but she can't bring herself to do it. She shakes her head, half-defiance, half-apology.

WENDY: All right. Sit here with me. Campaign of ideas. Remember that.

Written for StageMilk, 2024.