

**OLGA GARDNER GALVIN**

**THE  
ALPHABET  
CHALLENGE**



ENC Press

Celebration of tolerance is the  
first refuge of the intolerant.

— GEORGE F. WILL

“Fuck ’em,” said Ford. “You can’t  
care about every damn thing.”

— DOUGLAS ADAMS,  
*MOSTLY HARMLESS*

## EXCERPT

**H**owell stopped the car short, opened the door, and got out. Disregarding the traffic, he walked to the middle of the highway, and picked up a tiny dull disk. Dropping it in his pocket, he returned to the car and resumed driving.

Fifteen cars behind him honked hysterically and obscenely, but Howell ignored them.

“Are you tripping?” Addison inquired.

“What do they all think, it’s just a meaningless bumper sticker, just ‘cause I’m trying to be funny or something? It’s a warning, man. I mean it. I do brake for lucky pennies. It’s bad luck not to pick one up.”

“I don’t think it’s bad luck if you’re driving at the time.”

“I can’t take chances. I’ve already gotten too careless, and look what happened. Three months of hard work down the toilet. Fucking bastards. If I catch the motherfucker who did it, I’m gonna kick him in the balls until they fall out of his ears. Fucking vandals.”

“Did you call that phone number they left you?”

Howell did. He heard a prerecorded message. “If you have a complaint about PeopleCare’s actions, press 1. — If your place of business was rendered unusable by our activists, press 2. — If you plan to file charges, you need to know that your place of business had been found in violation of a number of the New York City office regulations and/or zoning laws.

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You are free to file charges, but we'll be forced to file counter-charges. We have a full list of your violations on file. If you want to know what violations, press 3. — If you have any other questions, please stay on the line.”

Howell stayed on the line. A polite young lady looked up the name of his business and the date it was trashed and confirmed that it had indeed been found in violation of several regulations, among them lack of shutters to block out sunlight to accommodate UV-sensitive customers. She also advised Howell that penalties for vandalism were much lighter than for violation of the New York City office regulations and/or zoning laws. Somehow, Howell believed her.

From the parking lot, he followed Addison through the woods up a narrow path to a cement cube of a six-story building. Dozens of fire extinguishers hung on trees around the building. The sign at the tobacco kiosk by the entrance announced:

**TOBACCO ROAD SMOKING AREA**  
**PROUDLY SERVING NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY SMOKERS**  
**SINCE 2015**  
**BROUGHT TO YOU BY**  
**AMERICAN SPIRIT CIGARETTES**

Even on a Monday afternoon, the square room on the first floor, with concrete tables and benches, was crowded. Coming out here on a weekend would be suicide.

“I still can't figure out who benefited from those stupid antismoking laws,” Howell shouted over the noise of powerful air cleaners, picking a cigarette out of a fifty-dollar pack, five dollars of which was the actual price of the cigarettes, and the rest — various and interesting taxes.

“People who didn't want to breathe secondhand smoke?” Addison suggested. A blissful smile spread over his face as his lungs filled with smoke.

“Hardly. When millions quit smoking, everybody's taxes went up to fill the gap in the economy, and they still breathe car fumes. Where's the gain?”

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“Are you about to commit sociology again?”

“God forbid. Speaking of God.”

“Who’s speaking of God?”

“I am. I think I have an idea. When you were a kid, did you ever hear that to get rich quick all you had to do was start a new religion?”

“Yeah?”

“Why do you think that is?”

“People seem to like new religions, for some reason?”

“Americans like new religions. The rest of the world is reasonably content with religions they’ve had for centuries.”

“And your point is . . .?”

“Americans like new religions. That’s my point.”

“You’re going to start a new religion.”

“No. I’m going to analyze why Americans like new religions.”

Addison took a deep drag on his cigarette and sat back. “Do tell.”

“Here goes. Americans are used to variety of choices like no other people. If you want toothpaste that fights cavities, there’s one. If you’re more concerned about whiteness, there’s another. There’s a third, if you like yours sugarless, and a fourth, if you want all of the above. It’s just toothpaste, for fuck’s sake, but there’s one for every taste and folly. And it’s like that with everything. Religion is just a product. OK, maybe a service. You want a really strict one that forbids you to have any fun at all — you have a few choices there. You want a more lenient one — take your pick. One that allows you to do anything you fucking want to, ’cause you’re already forgiven wholesale — it’s available. You want uncluttered simplicity — you have your Zen Buddhism. You want clutter — you’ve got your Yuppie Buddhism.”

“Yuppie Buddhism?”

“The one where you chant for material possessions.”

“And it works?”

“Yes, but it’s not the point. The point is, you can browse and sample until you find a religion that suits your personal priorities. And if you can’t find one, you can start your own. And that’s how you get rich quick, because with a good sales pitch you can attract enough suckers who’ll pay to belong to your little club.”

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“But you don’t want to start a new religion.”

“No. I want to take it one step further. Any religion requires a degree of responsibility. You have to give something to get something in return. Fuck that. I’ve got a better idea. It’s a gold mine. Collect enough money and skip town.”

“Where’re you gonna go?”

“Australia. You’re coming with me. We’ll have mangoes falling out of trees right on our breakfast table. We’ll start an importing-exporting firm or something. You can do the books.”

Howell took the last puff of his cigarette and expertly flicked it into a small funnel-shaped hole in the middle of the table. With a sucking noise, the smoldering butt disappeared into the furnace below.

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“What the fuck was that?” Mac whispered hoarsely.

Matha Batha’s comeback would have never attracted the attention of PeopleCare if it weren’t for a low-level Sibling who wanted very much to move up the totem pole. The zealous Sibling, a production manager of a TV-program magazine, saw an announcement of the interview with a Howell Langston Toland on channel 5238 and faxed it to Frankie Rosebrook, who brought it to Mac’s attention, forgetting in his excitement to mention the helpful Sibling.

Frankie jumped up. “I’ll contact the Dwarf Society right away,” he offered eagerly. “I’ll see if they’re offended or what . . . Oh . . . They wouldn’t be calling themselves the Dwarf Society, would they?”

“Try the Little Folk Organization or something,” Sibling Linda Flores advised. “Kissass,” she added under her breath.

Mac reached for the remote control and turned the TV off. The PeopleCare conference room grew quiet. Mac focused a pale stare on Frankie.

“Siddown.”

Frankie sat down.

“Has anybody ever seen that man?” Mac demanded.

Mac’s three most trusted Caring Siblings looked at each other and shrugged. Derrick had a feeling that there was something familiar about the sandy-haired man they just saw on TV.

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He liked the man. He tried to remember why. He liked the man because the man had invited him to play basketball . . . Oh.

"I met him once," Derrick said. "I don't know his name, though."

Mac turned the cobra stare at him. "His name is Howell Langston Toland. We just heard his name on that senile hag's show."

"Oh." Derrick retreated. "Right."

"Under what circumstances did you meet?" Mac demanded.

"I got his car towed," Derrick reported brightly, "because he wouldn't give up his parking spot for the differently abled equality."

"Good," Mac said. "Did he mention his stupid fucking cause?"

"You mean the Alphabet Challenge?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"No. It was just an argument about parking."

"And you got him towed away."

"Yes."

"Well, now we've got to get his people unionized."

"Uni . . . what?"

"Unionized! Unionized! Like the workers, a hundred years ago!" Mac got up from behind the long conference table and stood by the window, looking at the river. "This bastard is violating the American way. We've got a huge organization running here. We've got all the survivor groups accounted for and coordinated. I can't have some upstart suddenly show up on national TV with some new cause I never heard of, and start running his own show any old way. I mean, who the fuck is this guy? He has absolutely no track record as a human-rights activist! Zero! Zip! I'd know him if he did!"

Siblings exchanged glances. Any cause meant to rectify discrimination against any group of survivors of the said discrimination had to come in under the PeopleCare's supervision. It wasn't the law (yet), but everybody knew that. Otherwise, too many groups would be running amok with their own agendas, working at cross-purposes. Mac was the only person holding fort between the well-coordinated order of PeopleCare and complete chaos and anarchy. Every Sibling knew that.

"So," Mac continued without looking at the Siblings. "This Howell Langston Toland will have to work with us. We'll

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launch a program to absorb his group. What will we need to do?" Mac whirled back into the room. The last question was a form of a spontaneous quiz Mac liked to give the Caring Siblings, to test their alertness and to make sure their thoughts flowed in the correct direction.

"Subdivide his group members by their other disadvantages," Frankie suggested. "So we can cross — you know, pollinate them with our other groups."

"Offer them first picks of some privileges," Linda said firmly. "So they can see we're supersensitive to their handicapability."

"No," Mac said, exasperated. "No! When are you Siblings going to start thinking bigger? Why do you all have such limited fucking vision? We won't cross-pollinate them with other groups! We'll scatter them among our other groups, absorb them, and remind them that there are plenty of other causes and other disadvantages, much more important! And why will we do that? Derrick!"

"To protect them," Derrick replied mechanically, engrossed in his own thoughts. "So that they're dispersed so far apart and kept so busy with their other handicapabilities, they'll have no incentive and no way to get back together with that Toland guy who is only distracting them from true issues."

"Very good," Mac said. "Very good. But why aren't you participating in the discussion? We're having a discussion here, in case you haven't noticed."

Derrick looked up. "I'm sorry," he said. "But there's something I'm not clear about."

"Yeah?" Mac sighed.

"What if this Toland guy's people don't want to get unionized? What if they like him? What if they don't want to come to us?"

Mac's usually colorless face turned white. The Caring Siblings cringed and wished they were dead. It was routine with them.

"If they don't want to come to us?" Mac repeated in a horrible whisper. "If they don't want to come to us?! If they like him? Well, they're just going to have to like *me* instead! This Toland guy only cares about his own little cause! About his own pathetic-alphabet little cripples! Me, I care about everybody! I wake up at three in the morning and just lie there thinking about how to make the world a truly fair and com-

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passionate place for everybody. Sometimes I care so much, I can't eat! I cared so deeply, it ruined all three of my marriages! My pale skin repels me! My American passport revolts me! They're marks of an intolerable privilege bought at the price of others' agony! I just can't see how his crowd wouldn't want to come to me! My life is only worth living because I live it for the others! It is my duty to bring the alphabetically challenged into the fold! And I won't rest until they come to me!" Mac's fingers cramped into claws, and droplets of spit flew all over the room from the thin-lipped mouth. "What if they like him,' indeed! Derrick!"

Derrick forced himself to stop cringing and look up at Mac's face twisted with fury.

"You go and find out everything about this Toland guy," Mac ordered. "Not his official bio. Not what's already known about him. Everything there is, ever was, or ever will be to know about him. Linda! You take Derrick's groups. Frankie! You go on supervising daily activities."

Linda and Frankie nodded. For Linda it was a promotion. Frankie belonged to the no-news-is-good-news school of thought. Then Linda remembered something. She took a deep breath.

"Mac," she said cautiously. "We might have a problem here."

Mac stared at her heavily and silently. Mac didn't much care for problems.

"Mac," Linda continued bravely. "Derrick runs a whole division of People for Preservation of Their Cultural Traditions. I already have groups of People Against Child Abuse and People Against Female Circumcision. There may be a conflict."

"Where do you see a conflict?"

"Some of his subgroups' cultural traditions involve pledging their newborn daughters in marriage to the highest bidder, and some want their right to practice female circumcision."

"What's your point?"

"How can I lead groups with mutually exclusive goals?"

"Why not?"

"Because . . . it's like playing chess against yourself."

Shit, Frankie thought. I'm gonna get saddled with those savages.

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Mac's jaw tensed. Linda bit her lip and prepared to be flayed.

"Well, you're not playing with yourself here, young lady," Mac hissed, "you're playing with a lot of people's lives. If you save a female from circumcision, you've done your job. If you save a person from being arrested and thrown in jail for practicing the customs of her or his ancestors, you've also done your job. It's not your place to take sides! It's not your place to judge victims of discrimination lest you stoop to the level of their discriminators! Mutually exclusive as they may appear, all these goals are equally valid and deserving of respect! Diverse they may be, but diversity is what makes America great!"

Mac's voice rose. Mac's nostrils flared. "And it is our duty to preserve all its multicultural wealth for the children! We cannot and will not allow our children to grow up narrow-minded and culturally shortchanged! That's what we're working for! So that the next generation of American children can come a little closer to becoming a race of compassionate, sensitive, understanding human beings! Got it?"

Linda nodded. Frankie sighed with relief.

"Mac!" Derrick pleaded. "Can I keep my Just Plain Stupid group? Please! They're . . . they're like children to me! I really care about them!"

Mac looked at him dubiously. "I'm warning you, you'll be busy. But since you care so much . . . OK, whatever, keep them. Next issue," Mac announced. "We need to start thinking about what we can do to get Congress to curtail the use of electricity in this country."

Linda figured she was already in the dog house for the day. "Why?" she asked bravely.

"Because electricity is what fuels globalization," Mac explained with an eye roll. "I've been to villages in Africa that had a vibrant culture and great communities, and they were disrupted and destroyed by electricity. People who used to spend their days and evenings in the streets playing music on their own instruments and sewing clothing for their neighbors with their own hands, now sit in their huts watching TV. Americans need to ask themselves what personal conveniences and self-indulgences they are willing to give up in order to stop destroying other people's indigenous cultures. Frankie. Get on it."