

# THE CASE FOR BARBARA



a novel  
by

**John Ginsburg**

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The Case For Barbara tells the story of a sexual harassment case in the university world. A young professor in Political Studies is accused of offering a top grade to his student in exchange for sex. The story is set in the year 2000, when an atmosphere of political correctness and sexist sensitivity pervades the university world.

Larry Reimer is nearing the end of a probationary contract at Wolseley University when he is accused of sexual harassment by his student, Barbara Milton. While the evidence essentially amounts to her word against his, Reimer is known to have had a previous affair with a student and Barbara's testimony is supported by her roommate.

The charge against Reimer proceeds through a special committee, chaired by an ambitious feminist scholar. Late in the proceedings, the situation becomes complicated, when the complainant's roommate contacts a colleague of Reimer's and offers dramatic new evidence.



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## Excerpts from *The Case For Barbara*

### From Chapter 6: The Testimony

... The defendant, Larry Reimer, appeared before the committee on Wednesday, March 1. Fifteen pairs of analytical eyes awaited him as he walked into 1A28. Having just arrived from outside, Larry threw off his maroon-coloured parka and placed it on the back of the only available chair. As was his custom, he was clean-shaven; he wore a grey tweed jacket, white shirt and tie.

Larry was clearly nervous and somewhat anxious, as one might expect. He gave a quick smile and nodded his greetings. As he took a glance around the room, he barely noticed two friendly faces: his colleague Patrick Conroy and his lawyer Richard Minnock. As he sat down, Larry's parka fell off the back of his chair. Everyone waited for an awkward moment as he got up and picked it up off the floor. Larry then sat down for a second time, took off his glasses and wiped them with a tissue he had taken out of his shirt pocket. Aside from these movements, the room was completely still. Finally, Larry settled in his seat, took a breath and made eye contact with Julie Novel across the table.

Every one of the members of the SH committee knew about Larry Reimer's past affair with his night student, or at the very least, had heard about it in some way. Responding to straightforward legal advice, the committee decided at their first meeting that that affair should play no role in their consideration of the complaint. Questions for Larry Reimer would be directed only at the incident with Barbara Milton and would avoid ideas and opinions about student-professor relationships in general.

Julie Novel opened the meeting as she had the previous one, outlining the committee's role and process and reading out the harassment charge against Reimer.

Novel: 'Professor Reimer, thanks for coming today. Now, the committee has received and read your written statement. Before we ask you a few questions, is there anything you would like to add to your statement?'

Larry's written statement was virtually identical to the statement he had made to Leona Zipman. He was under strict advice from his lawyer to keep his responses simple; to be direct and unemotional. For the most part, he carried himself well. Although he appeared a bit tense, he spoke in an even tone, and took the questions head-on.

Reimer: 'I just want to repeat that this charge against me is a complete fabrication. I did not come on to Barbara Milton. I did not suggest or initiate the prospect of any kind of romantic or sexual relationship. It was exactly the opposite. After we had discussed her grades, she simply came out and offered sex in return for a grade of A. And I asked her to leave, immediately.'

N: 'The meeting in question was on January 24, around 2:30 pm. Is that correct?'

R: 'Yes.'

N: 'Was the door closed during your meeting with Ms. Milton?'

R: 'I always leave my door open during office hours. After I looked up her grades, just before she made an offer of sex, she got up and closed the door.'

N: 'Did you leave the door closed?'

R: 'It was just for a minute. She closed the door and then walked over to me and propositioned me. I asked her to leave and then she left.'

N: 'Did you do anything or say anything to her during that meeting which would have suggested you were interested in her sexually? Or in any personal way?'

R: 'No. I had never even spoken to her before. She came to my office. She said she wasn't doing so well in the course and that she wanted to get a good grade to get into law school. I looked up her grades. Her overall term work is at a C level. I told her that. Then she got up and closed the door and made her offer of sex for an A. That's the entire extent of the meeting in my office.'

After this answer, Larry looked nervously around the long table, expecting questions to come from other members of the committee. He had been sitting forward, tensed on the edge of his seat, looking straight ahead.

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## **From Chapter 2: The Case Against Larry Reimer**

... Eli moved the letter under the other remaining piece of mail. It was a memo from the Promotion and Continuing Appointments Committee, the PCA. He opened it and glanced at the contents listed on the first page. Minutes from the last meeting; notice and agenda for the next meeting. He folded it back up, returned it to the envelope and placed the envelope on the desk.

He opened the letter from Jack Fine.

Eli: I called you at home a couple of times lately, but must have missed you. Why don't you get a machine already? Come on Eli, take the plunge. They're on sale.

Why am I writing to you? Is it because I'm about to leave the city for a while? I'm actually heading out to Alberta - visiting friends in Calgary and then heading up to Edmonchuck to cover the Oilers playoff games for the paper (They'll be out in four games.)

Or, do I have a more diabolical reason for writing? Sadly, the latter. But let me say something first.

I just now realized your name could be a Chinese name - Hee Lai (with a silent 'h' so you could work in Quebec). After all these years.

Actually, I know you know that I know that you're not supposed to say anything to anybody about the Reimer case. About your committee and what's happening...And I know you know that that's what I'm going to ask you about.

So I'll just say it. A certain friend of mine at the paper (Gail Wolsky - city news, you know her) asked me if I'd do her a favour and ask you. Is there anything you can tell me about the case that she could use? Something that is already finding its way around the university that no one else knows about yet? Something that wouldn't put you in a spot? Something that couldn't be traced to you? It would be an anonymous source. How the committee will probably vote; when it's going to vote; what the university has on him; how the committee used it; names of any people involved who can be identified...? Or anything at all that would be a scoop - fighting in your committee meetings - anything....

OK, I've asked you. If there's anything, can you please give Gail a call - at her home number 981- 0989. Thanks, big guy.

Now, just so you don't think I only think about business, I want to tell you about a book I'm planning. It's going to be a Jewish cowboy story. Keep this to yourself. It'll be set in the days of the old wild west, in Canada; in the mountains around Canmore, Alberta. There's a famous bandit named Chaim Hornbloom. He holds up stage-coaches and robs banks. There's nothing very redeeming about him. He *did* have his heart broken - his brother Aaron took off with his woman and cleaned him out. But, really, he's just an ordinary thief. He has a cabin high in the Rocky Mountains. And he is known as Rocky Mountain Chai. This nickname, of course, is the main reason someone would write a book about him. Anyway, the good folks living in the area are tired of being robbed and menaced, so they hire a sheriff. His name is Eli Pearl. Eli is one tough cookie, but is a devoted member of the tribe. He has two sons with two different women and has insisted on bar-mitzvahs for both. Originally from Swift Current, he is known to be fearless and a crack shot. He strikes up a posse and they head up into the mountains to get Rocky Mountain Chai. Meanwhile, Chai and two of his cronies get wind of the plan and they get ready to face the posse.

That's all I'm going to tell you at this point. The title of the book is *Eli's Coming*. The target audience will remember the Three Dog Night song with that name. That song was actually written by Laura Nyro, and what is little known is that she was herself a member of the tribe. So it's perfect. By the way, there's no Passover subplot, putting out matzos for Eli or anything like that - although I have thought about it. You probably don't think I'm serious, do you?

I'll give you a ring when I get back from the land of Chaim Hornbloom.

Jack

Eli, who'd had a smile on his face as soon as he'd started to read the letter, was laughing out loud by the end of it. Fine was a case and a half. Every time you talked to him he would tell you about some amazing idea he was working on. Or he'd make one up on the spot. He just cracked Eli up.

Putting the letter into a desk drawer, Eli picked up the memo from the PCA Committee.

Tuesday, April 4, 2000

**To:** All members of the Promotion and Continuing  
Appointments Committee

**From:** J. Novel, Chair

**Notice of Meeting:** Friday, April 7 at 4pm in 231 AB

**Agenda:** Application T16

1. Statement from the Dean of Social Sciences
2. Final Discussion
3. Vote
4. Next Meeting

**Attached:** Minutes of the March 22 meeting

Eli flipped the page and glanced down the minutes... Application T16. Larry Reimer's application... The sexual harassment charge had kiboshed it from the beginning. As he sat reading the minutes, he shook his head. Even after all this time, it still seemed so unreal. Larry Reimer! Of all people! Larry was the most unlikely person to be involved in these kinds of things. First, a tense romantic drama with one of his night students. And then, less than two years later, accused of sexually harassing and compromising another student. Larry, of all people!

If you'd ever met Larry, you just wouldn't believe it. He was one of the quietest and most polite men you could ever meet. Smart and respectful. Soft spoken. Blue-eyed, blonde-haired, baby-faced. Always clean shaven, wearing round John Lennon-style glasses and a jacket and tie. No matter when you ran into him, he was always ready with a friendly word and a smile. His academic work and his publication record were above average. Students spoke highly of his classes. And he also had a glowing reputation for his work outside the university...

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### **From Chapter 8: A Drink With A Friend**

...But Lisa hadn't even begun. 'No, really' she said. 'The things we've spent our time on... Before we even looked at a single application - I think it was our second or third meeting, we started talking about the word 'mandate'. Not about what our mandate was, but about the word itself. Is it a sexist word? It has 'man' in it. Should we use it in our discussions? In our official correspondence? Or should it be banished? We spent a meeting and a half on that. I couldn't believe it. It just went on and on. There's some scary women on that committee; it's not like I'm going to stand up and tell everyone what they should be talking about.'

As Lisa talked about the use of 'man' words, Eli's own language sensitivities flashed across his mind. To him, language issues, including the use of gender-related words, were more expansive. They really had to do with the appropriation of language, of individual words. Certain groups of people laid claim to certain words - how those words should be used - and people outside those groups used those words at their peril. Gender-based language provided lots of examples, like the word 'girl'. It was quite acceptable and quite common for a woman to say something like 'She's one of the girls from work', referring to some other female she wanted to refer to. But a man who said the same thing, could well be pilloried by a female listener. He could be called sexist, chauvinistic, derogatory. Even if his intention and his meaning and his understanding were identical to the woman saying the same thing. Simply because he was outside the group that was 'allowed' to use

the word.

Male rappers, at least African-American male rappers, seemed to have an exemption. They used loaded words like 'girl' and 'bitch', not to mention the N-word, constantly in their lyrics. And there had never been any reports of a feminist protest of any kind against rappers, not that Eli knew of, anyway. It was a conversation he'd like to have with Lisa some time.

Eli's response was deliberately indirect. 'Who did you say the chair was?'

'Pat Sherriton' Lisa answered. 'She's the director of the Gay and Lesbian Resource Center at the U of M. She's a chauvinist's worst nightmare. How can I describe her? She's a combination of Rush Limbaugh and Andrea Dworkin. Nasty.'

Eli instinctively and instantly permuted the names. 'Andrush Limdwork! Hey, that sounds like a Hungarian mathematician.' They both laughed.

'If she thinks something's important, it's important' said Lisa. 'She's just super-aggressive. And kind of hostile all the time. Most of the women on the committee see things the same way she does. They're kind of out there. I mean, I'm a feminist. But I just get totally intimidated. If you're a woman, and if you think something's too extreme or too narrow-minded, you can't just speak up. It's hard to explain. You just have to bite your tongue. Because we're women and we're all in this together. There's this pressure...'