

Return of the CMEslinger – A CMEpalooza Short Story

Part 1 (Scott)

The CMEslinger rolled over in bed and felt for the warm body he was sure would be there to greet him. Grabbing a fistful of empty covers, his weary mind took a moment to remember that he was thrice divorced and had sworn off women after Mrs. Slinger #3 broke his heart 2 years ago by skipping town with a banjo salesman.

The CMEslinger took a peek at his alarm clock.

4:19 am.

Still 3 hours until the sun peeked over the horizon outside of his Chinatown loft. The remnants of the three Pickletinis that the CMEslinger downed while chatting with Ned, his favorite bartender at The Last Straw, sloshed around in his belly.

“As Phinneas always said, ‘Getting up is the hardest thing you’ll have to do all day,’” the CMEslinger groaned as he tested his creaky knees before standing up to stretch.

He limped into the kitchen, poured himself a post-hangover red eye, added a couple of aspirin, and decided to get on with it.

The last year, well, it hadn’t been great. The CMEslinger expected to feel exhilarated after besting the men in black in the “loser leaves CME” battle, and for a short time, he did. He rented out one of his favorite neighborhood izakayas and splurged lavishly on sushi for his entire team to celebrate their victory. He spent the next several weeks taking congratulatory calls from colleagues throughout the industry who had grown tired of the man in black’s arrogance and dismissive nature.

But when the hoopla died down, the CMEslinger found himself feeling a bit empty. Unmotivated. Lost.

His work suffered. He received an ROI from a supporter noting that the proposed start date on his recently submitted letter of request of “October 41, 2035,” seemed a bit unlikely. He penned outcomes reports that were littered with grammatical and analytical errors, which were fortunately caught by his staff before they went out the door. His organization received a progress report from the ACCME for the first time in its history after a file was missing that the CMEslinger had left on his kitchen table and the site surveyor wouldn’t agree to “just overlook.”

His personal life wasn’t much better. The CMEslinger was spending too much time at The Last Straw, playing darts against himself while watching his beloved 76ers blow another fourth-quarter lead. He couldn’t sleep. He’d lost weight. He rarely got together with long-time friends, even when they made it as convenient as possible.

Yes, without the shadow of the man in black chasing him, the CMESlinger had slipped into a dangerous depression.

All of which explains why, the first time his phone rang at 6:37 am, the CMESlinger ignored it. But then it rang again. And again. And again.

Finally, the CMESlinger picked up his phone. And heard that unmistakably raspy voice on the other end.

“We’ve got a problem.”

Part 2 (Derek)

The CMESlinger picked up his phone. And heard that unmistakably raspy voice on the other end.

“We’ve got a problem.”

“No, we don’t,” mumbled the CMESlinger and hung up the phone, burying his head under a mound of pillows. Unfortunately, like his sins, the ring of his phone will always find him out, no matter how many feather down pillows he tried to hide under. Not bothering to escape his entombment, he blindly sought out the ceaselessly ringing phone with his right hand until he finally located where he had tossed it on his nightstand, atop his dogeared copy of McGowan’s *#SocialQI*.

“Leave me alone,” the CMESlinger groaned into the phone.

“Boo hoo,” smirked the man in black. “What is going on there? Are you in a cave or something? I can barely hear you.”

The CMESlinger freed his head from its pillowed sarcophagus and rolled over onto his back.

“What?” he croaked out groggily. “What do you want? What time is it? Why are you calling me? I haven’t heard from you since I beat your as-, er, butt in Vegas.”

“Whoa,” the man in black exclaimed. “Now that I can hear you, you sound even worse. Don’t tell me you’re back on the pickletinis, again? I told you years ago that that pickle juice will give you an ungodly hangover. You never did listen to me.”

The CMESlinger let out a long sigh and struggled up into a sitting position.

“Can we not call them that—pickletinis? I like dirty martinis with a little dill brine, that’s all. Anyway, why am I talking about this...what do you want? I don’t hear or see hide or hair from you for a year and suddenly you’re calling me at some unholy time in the morning. I’ve got a splitting headache, my mouth feels like I ate a wool cardigan, and I need coffee so bad I’d even

drink one from a Keurig. You have 3 seconds to start talking or I'm hanging up again. One...two...thr-

"TAXIE is going to lose their accreditation!" the man in black blurted into the phone.

The CMESlinger's jaw dropped open as he stared at his phone for several moments.

"Hold on, that's not possible. Say that again."

The man in black growled, "TAXIE, The Academy for eXcellence In Education, the company that gave two losers like you and me a career, the company where we learned at the feet of Phinneas, is in danger of losing their accreditation. If they do, that's it. They are finished. Kaput. Finito."

The CMESlinger was now fully awake, sitting at the end of the bed, feet flat on the plush bedroom carpet.

"OK, fine, but that still doesn't make any sense. I know Phinneas is gone, but Marge is there. Marge, the Queen of Reaccreditation. Marge, who could do a reaccreditation blindfolded and with her hands tied behind her back and still get commendation. Marge, who the ACCME has on speed dial because they call her so often for consultations. How could TAXIE possibly be in danger of losing their accreditation?"

"Because, my pickletini swilling friend, Marge is missing. And the reaccreditation files are due Friday."

The CMESlinger shot to his feet.

"Marge is missing?! You should have said that from the beginning, you monochrome baboon! We've got a problem!"

For the sake of Phinneas and Marge, the man in black bit his tongue and counted slowly to five in his head.

"Yes," he said through gritted teeth. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. Now pull yourself together, put on some decent clothes, and get over here so we can figure out what to do. I'm across the street at Café Gilead. I'll buy you a decent cup of coffee if you hurry."

"I'll be there in five," snapped the CMESlinger and reached for the faded Wranglers hanging on the bedpost.

Part 3 (Scott)

As always, the man in black had taken a seat in the far corner of Café Gilead facing the front door.

“You’ve been watching too many movies,” the CMEslinger said as he slid into the vinyl upholstered booth. “What, you think that one of your exes is going to walk through that door with an eye for some vengeance? On second thought, I’ve met all three of your exes. Probably wise to be careful.”

“OK there, wise guy,” retorted the man in black. “Go ahead and gloat all you want. I can take it, especially from someone who looks like he just went through a car wash with the windows down. Good God, man – people warned me, but you really do look like hell.”

“Enough with the pleasantries,” the CMEslinger said. “What’s going on with TAXIE and Marge?”

The man in black proceeded to recount his actions of the last 3 days since he received the panicked call from TAXIE’s vice president of education concerning Marge’s disappearance and the organization’s dire straits regarding their upcoming accreditation review. He told the CMEslinger about the frantic calls to Marge’s sister in North Carolina, her daughter in Sweden, and her best friend in Maryland. He explained how he drove the 4 hours from his beach shack in Wildwood Crest, NJ, to TAXIE’s headquarters outside Washington DC, spending hours with the team there replaying Marge’s actions on the day she disappeared. There was a call to the ACCME, another one to the AANP, and even one to the ANCC. The man in black had even checked in with the tournament director of the U.S. Boggle Championship — Marge was a three-time national champion – to see if she was at some sort of international tournament.

No one had heard a peep from Marge in 5 days.

“So she’s not with her family,” the CMEslinger said.

“Nope.”

“And she’s not onsite at a CME event.”

“You’re catching on.”

“And she’s not on one of her accreditation jaunts or at some other special event.”

“Not that I’ve been able to figure out.”

“So that can only mean one thing. She’s helping someone who is in a whole heap of accreditation trouble.”

“Bingo, my friend. Just like 13 years ago.”

And with those words, the CMEslinger and the man in black were transported back in time to the last episode when Marge vanished. Thirteen years ago, on a random week in April, Marge had simply—poof—disappeared from the TAXIE offices for 4 days without a word. There was a similar panic until, like magic, Marge simply was back at her desk one morning as if nothing had happened. Upon questioning, Marge explained that one of her accreditation friends had made a major blunder in her interpretation of ACCME Standard 3.5 and needed some round-the-clock help to rectify the situation and alert learners retroactively to the relevant disclosures of one of her organization’s recent presenters.

“He called me to help him out of a jam,” Marge said. “What was I going to do, say no? We’ve been friends for decades.”

“But why didn’t you tell anyone where you were?” her officemates asked.

“What are you, my mother?” Marge responded. “I’m a big girl. I can do what I want and go where I want. Stop being such a busybody.”

And that was that. Until now.

“OK,” the CMEslinger postured, taking a sip of his black coffee. “So someone close to Marge, someone she wouldn’t dare let down, is in crisis. But who? And why now?”

The CMEslinger was puzzled. But as he fixed his gaze on the man in black, he wasn’t met with the same quizzical look. The man in black’s eyes were burning a hole through the cheap upholstery. He knew. The CMEslinger thought and thought and thought, before—voila—it finally dawned on him.

“Wait, you don’t think...” the CMEslinger said.

“I do. It’s the only possible solution. Why do you think I came to you in the first place? It’s certainly not because I admire your investigative skills. In your current state, you couldn’t figure out who picked up your trash this morning even if the truck was idling down the block.”

The man in black paused for a minute to let it all sink in.

“Get your coat. Let’s go see your daughter.”

Part 4 (Derek)

The CMEslinger grabbed his leather duster and stroked the shearling collar for a moment before shrugging it on. The coat had been a 50th birthday present from his daughter, Sierra, a few years back and was one of his few treasured possessions. The CMEslinger is not a man who surprises

easily, but the quality of his daughter's gift, not to mention the cost, had caught him off guard at the time. It shouldn't have.

Sierra had been a precocious child, talking at 10 months, reading at 4 years old, reciting Gertrude Stein by memory at the third grade talent show ("Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"). She tested out of fifth grade entirely and graduated from high school the same year she turned sweet sixteen. Scholarship offers came in from Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, but Sierra shocked everyone by staying local and attending Cuthbert University—a fine school, but one lovingly known as "Safety U" because no one ever listed it as their first choice. But Sierra had plans of her own, and an Ivy League education was not part of them.

There is a common saying in CME circles that "no one gets into CME on purpose." Phinneas, of course, had his own version of that, snorting "No one gets into CME; CME gets into you!" at the CMEslinger and the man in black more times than they cared to remember. Sierra would prove the exception to that rule with a singular focus on a career in CME that could only come from an offspring of the CMEslinger. As a toddler, she would tag along with him to the TAXIE office, and even when he moved on to form his own company, Sierra remained a TAXIE loyalist and became a key member of Marge's program management team by her senior year in high school. It didn't hurt that Marge was also her godmother, but no one ever questioned Sierra's capabilities. She would have skipped college entirely and gone full-time at TAXIE, except the CMEslinger put his ostrich skin booted foot down and insisted she get her degree (though it was actually the heartfelt talk between Marge and a tearstained Sierra that convinced her to accept a spot at Cuthbert and delay her burgeoning CME career by a few more years.)

At her graduation ceremony at Cuthbert, Sierra walked across the stage, grabbed her diploma, and hurried directly over to her new office at TAXIE, something given only to those with a promotion to Senior Program Manager. Over a period of 5 years, she rose to Program Director and then Vice President of Educational Strategy, the youngest employee to which TAXIE had ever bestowed a VP title. Her father's advice helped, but it was Marge and her tough love approach that Sierra credited most for guiding her in her career. She was 25 years old, a VP at one of the largest medical education companies in the world, and the apple of the CMEslinger's eye.

And then she went over to the dark side.

It is an inside joke to those who exist in the CME provider world, referring to the industry section of CME as "the dark side." Still, it came as quite a shock to everyone, Marge included, when Sierra announced she was leaving TAXIE for a Grant Director position at Tower Pharmaceuticals. And yes, the CMEslinger had to admit, it stung him more than a satchel full of hornets that his little girl was leaving the provider side for a job on the dark side. He never did

get a full explanation from her about why she was leaving. "I'm sorry, Dad. It's just something I need to do," was the most he ever got out of her.

She never offered an explanation to Marge, either, and Marge never asked for one. On Sierra's last day in the TAXIE office, as she was making her final walk down the hallway towards the elevator, Marge called her into her office, where she sat speedily clacking away at her computer keyboard. Tilting her head down slightly and looking at Sierra over the top of her halfmoon readers, Marge imparted a final bit of advice.

"You call me when you run into trouble."

"When"? Not 'if'?"

"Yes, 'when'."

"OK, Marge. I will. Thanks."

Marge nodded and went back to typing. She never looked back as Sierra walked away.

All this the CMEslinger relayed to the man in black as they Ubered over to Tower Pharmaceuticals HQ.

"Yes, I know all this already, you chucklehead," the man in black growled. "You forced me to listen to all your stories when Marge locked us in that hotel room in Vegas."

"Ah, right, right," the CMEslinger intoned absently.

The Uber glided up to the massive black edifice of Tower world headquarters, and the two unlikely partners jumped out and hurried into the front lobby. Neither man had been in the building previously, and it took them a moment to spot the intercom system for contacting occupants. Quickly scanning the directory, the CMEslinger punched in the numbers for Sierra's office. She picked up on the first ring.

"Yes?"

"Sierra? It's Dad. I'm downstairs."

"Oh."

An awkward silence of several seconds followed, interrupted only by the low frequency hum of the intercom.

"Sierra? You still there?" the CMEslinger asked hesitantly

"I'll be right down," his daughter said sharply and disconnected the line.

Part 5 (Scott)

As Sierra ambled down the spiral staircase that led into the front lobby, the CMESlinger was struck by how much his daughter had changed since the last time he saw her. It had been, what, 9 months since he drove the three hours to Sierra's trendy loft apartment and took her out for her birthday?

"Geez," the CMESlinger mumbled to himself. "Guess I should return that 'World's No. 1 Dad' coffee mug."

Sierra looked, well, different. Her hairstyle, her clothes, her general demeanor – she just didn't look like the confident, sometimes cocky, young woman the CMESlinger was used to seeing. She looked tired and scared. It was enough to make the CMESlinger want to throw his arms around her like he used to do whenever Sierra came to visit him in the TAXIE offices as a little girl.

"Hi dad," Sierra said as she hugged the CMESlinger, seemingly more out of obligation than familial affection. "Marge told me you'd probably show up sooner or later. You and your friend. Come on, let's get on with it."

A no-nonsense kind of gal. At least something about Sierra was the same.

Sierra signed in her visitors, escorted them to the corporate elevators located down the hall, and hit the button for the 24th floor. When the elevator doors swung open, the CMESlinger and the man in black stepped out and stared in awe. They could see the entire city before them through the bank of glass windows. It was the kind of view most people would pay millions for. But then again, Tower Pharmaceuticals had many, many millions to spend on that sort of thing.

Sierra glared at the duo.

"If you want to play tourist, I can come back in an hour."

"No, no, of course not," the CMESlinger stuttered. "Lead the way, darling."

"Don't darling me, dad," Sierra said. "I'm not your little girl, anymore."

"So much for the teary family reunion," the man in black muttered out of the side of his mouth.

"I'm no ingenue," Sierra said, overhearing the man in black's utterances. "But you already knew that. Come on already."

Sierra led the trio down the hall to her office, adorned with a brass nameplate and a caricature of Velma, the sassy detective from the Scooby Doo cartoons. As her door swung open, Marge glared at the CMESlinger and the man in black.

"It took you long enough to get here," Marge said. "I'm almost done my part. Now it's up to you...and her...to save the day."

"Almost done what? And what are we saving?" the CMEslinger said.

"You mean, you...they..." Marge said, looking inquisitively up at Sierra.

"No, I never called them," Sierra said. "I didn't want to... well, I was embarrassed."

"Well then, I guess you better start from the beginning," Marge said. "You boys better sit down. Storytelling time will let me finish up my part of this job before I hightail it out of here. I assume the folks back at TAXIE are pretty nervous right about now."

It was all a bit much for the CMEslinger and the man in black to take in. But before they could start asking questions, Sierra had taken their arms in hers and walked them over to the cushioned sofa in the corner of her office. She pulled up her desk chair beside them and started to speak.

"Four years ago, the annual ACCME Data Report came out and, as usual, I immediately put my work aside to check out the financial state of our industry. And as usual, it was depressing. Registration fees were down 5%. Advertising and exhibits down 7%. Commercial support down 10%. It was the same story year after year. Depressing depressing depressing.

"So I went home, heated up a mug of tea and sat down in front of the television to watch the 76ers game with my journal in front of me. And that's when it happened. Another ad for Linvolus, Tower Pharma's 'diabetes wonder drug.' A midcourt Tower Pharma logo right in front of the 76ers bench. Tower Pharma patches on the uniforms of the 76ers players.

"I did some digging online and found that Tower Pharma had spent \$510 million on direct-to-consumer advertisements for Linvolus alone in the United States that year. I'm sure those corporate sponsorships were in the hundreds of millions as well. Guess what they spent, at least according to their corporate transparency report, on CME programming for diabetes? \$4 million. Total.

"I was tired of being underappreciated, but I was on the provider side of our world, so what could I do? So I made it my goal to come here and make things right. Six months later, I was hired."

"But why didn't you tell me, or anyone, all of this when you left TAXIE?" asked the CMEslinger.

"Remember what you told me when I came home with a black eye and a bloody lip after getting into a fight with Jessica Bronwell, that mean girl down the street, when I was 9 years old?" Sierra asked.

“Yeah, she was 3 years older than you and was twice your size,” the CMEslinger replied. “What did you expect?”

“But did you remember **exactly** what you said to me?” Sierra said.

“Sure, I told you the same thing my old man told me when I was a kid,” the CMEslinger said.

“Never get into a fight you have no chance of winning.”

“Exactly,” Sierra replied. “I knew that one person fighting for dollars within Big Pharma seemed like the same situation, and I knew everyone was going to tell me that I was wasting my time, but it just felt like something I had to do. Not just for me, but for everyone who worked in CME for so long. For Marge. For the man in black. For you.”

“I see,” the CMEslinger said.

Tears started forming in the corner of Sierra’s eyes.

“And the worst part of it all is that you were right. I’ve been here for three years now and keep banging my head into the same wall over and over. I’ve worked hour after hour crunching data from providers, showing hard facts on the beneficial effect our limited budget is having on the healthcare team and the care of diabetes patients, arguing to my bosses that they don’t need another 30-second Linvolus commercial during the NBA playoffs. But I’m getting nowhere.

“Two weeks ago, I finally had enough. There was an advertising team outside my office filming a new commercial that is going to air during the Super Bowl – I read that we’re paying \$10 million for 30 seconds of airtime. That is nearly three times my annual budget gone – poof – in about the time it takes you to drink one of your pickletinis.

“So I did something really, really stupid one morning. I called up one of my buddies in IT and had him override the budgetary limits of my grant approvals. I had been saving 15 of the best proposals that were submitted to me last year in the hopes I would miraculously convince my bosses to push more funding my way. In one fell swoop, I approved them all. \$10 million worth of grants. Exactly what we’re paying for the Super Bowl commercial.”

“And that’s when you called in your emergency team,” the CMEslinger said. “Marge.”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Sierra said. “I knew that as soon as anyone with their hands on the department budget found out about what I did, the best thing that could happen was that I would be fired. I ducked every email and phone call from the providers whose proposals I had funded and avoided countersigning any LOAs. But that wasn’t going to last long.”

Now it was the man in black’s turn to chime in.

“And so the two of you have been doing what, exactly?” he asked. “You realize that you pulled Marge away from TAXIE during their most crucial time of the year? They may lose their accreditation.”

“I know,” Sierra said. “And I feel awful about that. But we’re not stupid. Marge told me exactly how long she would be able to spend helping me here. We’ve been squeezing every ounce of energy into our value proposition to try to convince our executives once and for all that we’re worth investing in.”

“I’ll be leaving in a few minutes,” Marge interjected. “TAXIE will be fine. I have all of my files in pristine condition. I knew you would eventually figure out I was here and that you would come to save the day. Which you’ll be doing very soon.”

“Save the day? How exactly am I going to save the day?” asked the CMEslinger incredulously. “Besides you, I don’t know anyone else who works here. I don’t have any influence on any decisions this company makes.”

“You’re right, dad,” Sierra said. “You won’t be saving the day, at least not this time.”

Sierra locked eyes with Marge before swiveling to point her finger at the man sitting beside the CMEslinger, at the man in black.

“He will.”

Part 6 (Derek)

The man in black looked at Sierra’s finger in confusion. Why was she pointing at him? He wasn’t going to save the day. Saving the day was the CMEslinger’s job. He was just along for the ride.

He glanced over at Marge to give her a what-are-these-morons-talking-about look and saw her looking back at him with a knowing smile.

“What?” he asked.

“Come on, you know,” she said, her grin growing larger.

Now the man in black was getting annoyed.

“Marge, seriously, I don’t know what you two are talking about. Why are you looking at me like that. What do you know that I don-“

The man in black bit off his words midsentence as realization set in. His eyes grew wide and he started to shake his head.

“Oh no, don’t even think about it. Nope. Not happening. No.”

Marge never flinched.

“Oh Walter, don’t make such a fuss. We both know you’re going to do it. Let’s skip past all the fake macho bravado and move on to your inevitable acquiescence to save time. We need to move quickly here.”

The CMESlinger had to work hard to suppress a snort of laughter at Marge uttering the man in black’s rarely used first name. He was so particular about cultivating his ridiculous “man in black” mystique, and the CMESlinger couldn’t help but be amused by Marge cutting through it all.

The man in black was starting to lose his composure and began to sputter.

“What...!...how dare...no chance...inevitable acquiescence??...!...that was supposed to be confidential!” he finally blurted out.

Marge stuck out her bottom lip in a look of mock pity.

“I know, Walter, I’m sorry. It couldn’t be helped. Desperate times and all that.”

She quickly brightened and looked over at the CMESlinger and Sierra.

“He’ll do it!” she said happily.

While Sierra gave a quiet little fist pump, the CMESlinger shook his head in bewilderment.

“Do what, exactly?” he asked. “Can someone tell me what in Sam Hill is going on here? I feel like the last wallflower at the school dance when the band starts playing Wonderful Tonight.”

Marge came over and patted him on the shoulder.

“Walter has the most lovely singing voice you ever heard,” she said with complete sincerity.

The CMESlinger was now completely confused.

“Listen, Phinneas used to tell me I wasn’t the brightest spark in the tinderbox, mostly in jest, I think, but I utterly and truly have no idea what any of you people are talking about. Can someone please explain so we can get on with doing whatever needs doing?”

Marge gave the CMESlinger’s arm one last squeeze and went over to sit beside the man in black, who by now was slouched back on the couch, both palms covering his eyes and forehead, muttering about how this is not happening, not happening, this is definitely not happening.

“Back in the days when the three of us were still working for TAXIE, I stumbled upon a bit of information about our friend Walter here that is going to prove useful to us today. I can’t recall exactly when it happened, but I do remember that it occurred the evening after we had all watched an Alliance webinar on publishing outcomes. One of the panel members on the webinar was from the grants team at Tower and she spent most of her time complaining about how difficult it is to present outcomes data to senior management. Anyway, after the webinar I was in my office working late, as usual, when I heard the faint sounds of the most beautiful tenor voice. I walked out of my office thinking someone had left on their radio, but then the singing stopped and started up again. It was definitely someone in the office singing. I followed the sound of the voice and realized it was singing Bryan Adams’s (Everything I Do) I Do It for You, though the lyrics were a bit altered. It went:

Don’t tell me it’s not worth trying for

You can’t tell me outcomes aren’t worth dying for

You know IME’s true

Everything we do, we do it for you

“I turned the corner and standing at the copier, singing his heart out, was the man in black, who apparently was also working late and did not realize I was still there. Well, as you can imagine, he was horrified to see me and immediately stopped singing. I assured him there was no need for him to stop as he truly did and does have the voice of an angel. I teased him a bit about the change in lyrics and that’s when he said it. Do you want to tell them, Walter?”

The man in black said nothing but shook his head no. Marge continued.

“He told me ‘I know it’s silly, but listening to that webinar today made me think about all these supporters who moan about the challenges of presenting IME outcomes and ROI to their bosses. Maybe instead of doing the same old boring dog-and-pony PowerPoint shows, they should try adding a little pizzazz to their presentations. Do something that makes them stand out, grabs attention. And then I thought, if I’m ever in the position of making that kind of presentation to the C-suite, I would sing it. That would definitely be memorable. Then I started thinking of what song I would use and how I could change the words...and then you showed up.’”

Marge paused her story to give the man in black a quick smile and pat him on the back.

“So, when Sierra called me and explained her situation here, I thought back to that moment and knew exactly what we needed to do. Walter is going to sing the value proposition!”

The CMEslinger sat staring at Marge and the man in black with mouth agape. He seemed to be in a trance of disbelief. Once he recognized that Marge had stopped talking, he shook his head vigorously, as if to clear out the cobwebs, and leaned back in his chair.

“That is,” he said slowly, “without a doubt...the dumbest idea I have ever heard. We are going to rely on the singing voice of this two-bit knucklehead to save my daughter’s career? No way. Impossible.”

Marge’s eyes flared and the smile on her face hardened.

“First of all,” she said testily, “It’s not impossible. You haven’t even heard him sing. Second, the CEO of Tower – Thomas Vandersnook is his name in case you have forgotten – is a massive patron of the arts. He sings in his church choir and has a reserved box at the opera. Music is his passion. Third, and last, we are out of time. I am leaving now to get back to TAXIE and my reaccreditation. I have prepared all the charts, graphs, and slides you could possibly need for the value prop presentation. I have even selected the song and wrote suitable lyrics. It’s all right here. My work here is done.”

The CMEslinger, still bewildered by what was happening, leaned forward in his chair to plead with Marge.

“The CEO of Tower? You think we’re going to do this for Thomas Vandersnook? How are we even going to get a meeting with him?”

For the first time in a long while, Sierra spoke up.

“It’s OK, Dad. Leave that to me.”

Part 7 (Scott)

The man in black could hear the conversation between Sierra and the CMEslinger, could hear her explaining how she had met the Tower CEO’s oldest son, Anthony, during one of her regular birdwatching group outings 2 years ago and now counted him as one of her closest friends. There was something about how Anthony meets his dad on the first Saturday morning of every month for what they called “a day of culture” with each of them responsible for planning the day during alternating weeks. But really, he wasn’t paying attention.

On her way out the door, Marge had handed the man in black the lyrics he would have to learn for his lyrical presentation with Tower CEO Thomas Vandersnook. It was, well, it was a lot.

Docs Want Their CME

(Sung to the tune of Money for Nothing by The Dire Straits)

(Intro)

(Falsetto) Docs Want Their CME

(Verse 1)

Look at that line item, that's not the way you do it

Promo spending climbing year after year

That ain't working; that's not the way you do it

Change practice with funding for CME

What you're doing man, that ain't working; that's not the way you do it

Lemme tell ya, those docs ain't dumb

Maybe your sales force hit a few of 'em with a big-time pitch

Maybe your MSLs have 2 or 3 of them under their thumb

(Chorus)

We gotta focus on clinical outcomes, those evidence-based gains

We got the data that learners need, no more waste with ads on TV

(Verse 2)

All those actors with their dresses and their makeup

No way anyone believes what they have to say

All those actors making it sound so pretty

Until those side effects read off over the air

(Chorus x2)

We gotta focus on clinical outcomes, those evidence-based gains

We got the data that learners need, no more waste with ads on TV

(Verse 3)

We need to learn... to trust accredited providers

We need to learn... to make their data work for us

Look at those learners, with their thirst for clinical knowledge

We need to give them what they want

Five minutes of face time with a doc, what's that?

Hello, goodbye, here's a pen?

Wasting time and money so you can control the message

That ain't working; that's not the way to do it

Change practice with funding for CME

(Chorus)

We gotta focus on clinical outcomes, those evidence-based gains
We got the data that learners need, no more waste with ads on TV

(Verse 4)

Listen here
So here's the proposal
A reallocation of dollars, a realignment of priorities
That's the way you do it
Change practice with funding for CME
What you're doing ain't workin'; that's not the way to do it
Throwing promo money out the window like it's free
That ain't working; that's not the way to do it
Change practice with funding for CME

Look at this data, look at it
See how we can move the needle
Change practice with funding for CME
Easy, easy choices
Easy, easy improvements
Easy, easy funding decisions
That's what's workin'
Change practice with funding for CME

(Outro)

(Falsetto) Docs Want Their CME

Part 8: Finale (Derek)

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, the man in black read through the lyric of *Docs Want Their CME*. This tune was all wrong for him. While he projected the vibe of a scruffy outlaw with a gravelly low voice, the truth of the matter is that his singing voice was closer to the soulful tenor of Peter Cetera or Christopher Cross than the rumbling baritone of Mark Knopfler. This had the potential to be a disaster.

But he would do it, anyway. He would sing. Not for the CMEslinger, gods no. He would sing for Sierra, despite her being the offspring of a no-good honky-tonk clown. Sierra had talent and the man in black knew the CME world could ill afford to lose anyone of her caliber. He would sing for the industry that he loved.

“When are we doing this?” he growled quietly, interrupting Sierra and the CMESlinger’s conversation.

“Tomorrow morning,” Sierra replied, glancing at the time on her phone. “Ugh, can you two hang out here for a couple minutes? I have a meeting with my boss that I’m supposed to be at, well, right now. She said it wouldn’t take very long, so I should be back soon.”

Without waiting for a response, Sierra yanked open her office door and walked out. A moment later, she popped her head back in.

“Hey. Thanks, Walter.”

And then she was gone.

The man in black and the CMESlinger sat quietly, not saying a word to each other. The CMESlinger started to ask about the man in black’s hidden singing talent, but the man in black quickly hushed him with a raised finger and slow shake of his head. He was not in the mood and the CMESlinger, for once, decided not to antagonize him. So, they sat silently, waiting for Sierra to return.

Fifteen minutes later, as the CMESlinger absently flipped through the most recent edition of JCEHP and the man in black started to nod off with his chin on his chest, Sierra walked back through the door with a stunned look on her face. Seeing it, the CMESlinger dropped the magazine and stood up.

“What is it? What happened?”

Sierra walked over to her calfskin executive chair and flopped down.

“I just got laid off.”

“What?” the CMESlinger and man in black both barked simultaneously.

“Yeah, it wasn’t just a meeting with my boss. HR was there, too. I had no idea-“

The CMESlinger interrupted.

“You mean you were fired, right? If they found out what happened, they fired you, not laid you off.”

Sierra sighed.

“If you would let me finish. No, I was not fired. I was laid off. We all were—the entire grants department. There has been a change in leadership. The board voted out Vandersnook last night and installed a new CEO. They didn’t even tell me his name, just that he has been charged with increasing efficiencies by decreasing redundancies and to get it done as quickly as possible.

He sees IME and company-led education as a redundancy and in choosing between the two, he prefers to keep the one that allows the company to maintain the most control. And just like that... *poof* ...my entire department was eliminated. We're out."

The CMESlinger leaned back in his chair.

"So, they don't know about..."

He waves vaguely at the papers scattered on Sierra's desk.

"...all of this? Your late-night call to IT?"

Sierra shrugged.

"I guess not. No one has said a word to me about it."

"Unbelievable."

Everyone sat in stunned silence for a moment. Then the CMESlinger started up again.

Well, I'm sorry you got laid off, sweetheart. Huge bummer. Though, given your current circumstances..."

"Thanks. Yeah, it certainly could have been worse. And don't call me sweetheart in the office, Dad."

"Right, right. I have to say, you are taking this news surprisingly well."

Sierra gave a small smile and shrugged her shoulders again.

"Well, I assumed I was going to be fired, so being laid off is sort of a step up from that, especially considering that Tower provides a decent severance."

The CMESlinger nodded.

"Nice."

"And while Marge loved the idea of making Mr. Man in Black here sing, I think deep down she knew it wasn't a plan likely to work. Just before you two showed up she told me that if things went poorly, she'd happily take me back at TAXIE."

The CMESlinger grunted.

"So, a severance payout from Tower and a return to your job at TAXIE? Not bad. Not bad at all. God bless, Marge."

"God bless, Marge."

From his seat beside the CMEslinger, the man in black finally piped up.

“So...I don’t have to sing?”

The CMEslinger and Sierra both laughed.

“No, Walter,” the CMEslinger said mockingly. “You don’t have to sing. You can thank the Tower Board of Directors for that.”

“Don’t you start,” growled the man in black. “Just because Marge calls me Walter doesn’t mean you can, too.”

The CMEslinger rolled his eyes and turned to Sierra.

“C’mon, kid. You deserve a drink. Pickletinis on me.”

Sierra groaned.

“Just a glass of red for me, thanks.”

They both stood and the CMEslinger wrapped Sierra in a big, slightly awkward hug. She wasn’t used to this kind of outward display of affection from her father but appreciated his attempt at warmth. As they walked out the office door together, the CMEslinger paused and looked over his shoulder.

“Hey. Man in black. You coming?”

The man in black frowned as he rose from his seat.

“Yeah, I’m coming. But I’ll be a monkey’s uncle if I’m going to have one of those dang pickletini drinks.”

He joined the duo and the three of them left the building together, the man in black quietly humming the opening to *Docs Want Their CME*. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad song after all.