

THE CURIOUS CASE OF EDWARD GRACE
A Short Story about Community Service in Higher Education

By Larry LaForge

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Smashwords Edition

A prestigious university refuses to certify one of its students for graduation. What did Edward Grace do wrong? The school says he did not fulfill its highly acclaimed community service requirement – a key component of its brand image. Mr. Grace begs to differ. He pleads his case before a packed hearing room, leaving all to ponder the true meaning of community service. All characters, locations, and events are fictional, but the underlying issues are real and cause for reflection.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF EDWARD GRACE

“Mr. Grace, *you* requested this hearing.” Dr. Joyce Hairston cannot hide her frustration any longer. “You’re wasting our time. You could have given me this written statement weeks ago. And what’s the point if you’re simply going to say your statement speaks for itself?”

Humanity University’s dean of undergraduate students is furious and is not above making a spectacle of poor Edward Grace. Her gaunt, sickly appearance belies the power she wields on campus. With her eyeglasses down on her nose, she peers over the rims at the object of her wrath. Joyce Hairston intends to make sure no student ever tries this stunt again.

Edward seems defenseless and totally intimidated by Dr. Hairston. He feels all eyes upon him in the packed hearing room. Edward sits still as if frozen in his chair, staring blankly ahead. It’s not clear if he is capable of speaking.

Nonetheless, his resolve is unshaken and he will not yield his position.

Edward Grace is right and he knows it.

“See, I told you so.” Walter Dawson shows his pal Chuck Hays the mended fence on the corner. Walter and Chuck both moved to this college town to enjoy their retirement years. They

went to school here back in the dark ages, had successful careers, raised families, lost their spouses, and wound up reuniting back on their old stomping grounds.

Walter and Chuck can't think of a better place to live out their retirement years than on the edge of this picturesque college campus. But there are a few problems for these two and several other retirees living near campus.

Enrollment at HU is at an all time high, and Walter and Chuck are convinced that every student owns at least two cars. The athletic program has grown by leaps and bounds, with football and basketball games attracting large crowds that sometimes leave their trash behind. Parking is a nightmare, and anyone living near campus is likely to find unwelcome cars straddling the street and their property. The two fraternity houses around the corner don't help things, with their nonstop parties and all.

Chuck stares at the fence in amazement. "Third time something like this has happened this month."

"Alright Mr. Grace, please read your statement to the committee." Dr. Hairston has no choice but to allow this farce to continue.

Looking down at the paper in front of him, and avoiding eye contact, Edward's voice cracks slightly as he reads. "I Edward Grace do hereby certify that I have fully met all community service requirements of Humanity University."

"And where is your community service portfolio, Mr. Grace?"

Edward is now the one who looks annoyed. "Dr. Hairston, you know that I have chosen not to compile a community service portfolio."

Walter and Chuck stop by Irene's house to see if she had anything to do with the fence. Irene Matthews has lived in Campus Heights for over 50 years. She knows everything and everybody, except the students of course. They come and go.

Walter is out of breath from the hurried walk, and Chuck has to start the conversation. At 74 with a heart condition, Walter gets excited too easily and has to slow down. Chuck isn't much better off. Irene constantly rags them about their infirmities, but she is no spring chicken herself.

"The fence is fixed," Chuck says, waiting to see if Irene is surprised.

“Yeah, I know. I saw it this morning. You guys want some coffee?”

Walter, who has now caught his breath, doesn't understand Irene's apparent indifference. “Did *you* get it fixed?”

Irene laughs out loud. “Yeah, right. I'm going to spend my paltry check on that ratty fence.”

Joyce Hairston just happens to have with her a stack of brochures about Humanity University. She hands one to Edward Grace and passes out copies to members of the appeals committee, all seated in the first row. The floor belongs to Dr. Hairston, since Edward chose simply to present his written statement. She is prepared to move in for the kill.

“Ever seen this, Mr. Grace?” Dr. Hairston is holding up a glossy brochure for all in the room to see. The room is large and holds over 100. Every seat is filled and people are standing in the back looking over the shoulders of those standing in front of them.

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Please tell us when you first saw this brochure, Mr. Grace.”

“When I applied for admission.”

“Did you read and understand it?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Dr. Hairston pauses for effect. She has clearly watched too many episodes of Law and Order. “And did you confirm with the HU admissions office that you understood all degree requirements, including community service, Mr. Grace?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Walter and Chuck are shocked by Irene's lack of curiosity about the miraculous fence repair. “There's probably a reasonable explanation,” she says while drying dishes at her kitchen sink as the two old guys sit at the table in the tiny breakfast area.

“Well what about the Barringtons' mailbox and the fallen tree in the Watsons' yard?” Walter seems a little annoyed as he poses the question.

“And don't forget the new flowers planted at the entry sign, and the brush clearing in the park and pathways,” Chuck chimes in to emphasize Walter's point.

“Big deal. Will Barrington’s son probably fixed their mailbox. I bet his friends were the ones who bashed it. I know for a fact that the city cleaned up the tree mess at the Watson place from the ice storm, and any of the neighbors could have planted flowers or cleared brush.”

“You’re wrong about the city,” Walter says, getting more agitated as the conversation continues. “The city won’t move a fallen tree on private property. It fell late at night on the Watsons’ driveway, and was cut up and gone the next morning. No way the city did it.”

“Well Edna Watson thinks the city did it,” Irene states without looking up from the sink.

“Maybe we should ask Edna Watson who fixed the fence,” Chuck says with more than a hint of sarcasm.

“Maybe we should.”

Edward can’t believe Dr. Hairston is actually going to read the entire brochure to the committee and all those in attendance at the hearing.

Dr. Hairston knows what she is doing. The hearing is being recorded and she wants the contents of the brochure in the official record.

She starts reading in her slow and deliberate voice, somewhat low pitched for a person of her slight physical stature. Edward closes his eyes briefly, as if to seek relief from this ordeal. His mind begins to wander.

Half listening and half daydreaming, he drifts back to his early teenage years. He distinctly recalls his early encounter with the issue that has him in trouble today.

It was his own father, then a candidate for city council in their hometown, who alerted Edward to the phoniness of it. Not that community service is phony. Not at all. The problem is when there’s an ulterior motive that has little or nothing to do with helping people. Edward watched in embarrassment and shame as his father arranged several community service photo ops to advance his political agenda. Edward remembers that his father never did any work after the photographers and reporters left, calling it a day as soon as each event was duly recorded.

Edward wonders what his parents would think of his current predicament if they were still alive. They have been gone for five years now, and Edward must find his own way through the world. He figures it’s just as well. They would never have understood.

As he sits there in a fog, Edward can’t get the HU catch slogan out of his mind. It’s like an annoying jingle for a TV commercial: *Community service is ingrained in the culture of Humanity University*. He is not really listening closely to Dr. Hairston’s reading of the brochure,

but sure enough she has just finished reciting that very statement as she methodically plods on.

Edward has noticed that the school practices what it preaches. All faculty and staff are expected to engage in community service, not just the students. And everyone is expected to keep records. No good deed shall go unreported.

Edward wonders why his fellow students go along with what seems to be a contest that has more to do with themselves than those they are supposedly helping. Everyone seems to be trying to best everyone else in documented service activities.

He snaps out of it just in time.

“Let me emphasize that community service is ingrained in the culture of Humanity University.” Dr. Hairston’s recitation mercifully comes to an end.

“I’ll tell you what we have here,” Walter Dawson says in his excited voice. “What we have here is a mystery. A real-life mystery.”

“The only mystery we have here is how you two old codgers managed to get dressed this morning.” Irene never misses an opportunity to strike.

“Seriously, Irene, something strange *is* going on,” says Chuck.

“OK. I’ll give you that. Some really nice things have happened that we can’t explain. Let’s just enjoy it.”

“I say we investigate,” Walter asserts with Chuck’s nod of approval.

“Let me get this straight.” Irene puts down her dishcloth and moves closer to the table where her friends are seated. “You think there is a vigilante do-gooder out there, and you want to track him down?”

Irene isn’t finished. “I think someone recognizes there are many retirees in Campus Heights and sometimes we need a little help keeping things up. I say God bless that person. What’s the point in trying to track him down?”

“So we can find out who it is,” Walter says.

“So we can properly thank him,” Chuck adds.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to be thanked. Maybe he or she – did you ever consider that it was a she – just did it out of pure kindness. Not everyone has to be praised for their good deeds.”

“Maybe so, but we’re going to get to the bottom of this,” says Chuck.

“We’re on the case,” adds Walter.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Irene mutters as she heads for the back door. She is going

outside to check on the sheets hung out to dry on the old-fashioned backyard clothesline, which is a clear violation of Campus Heights rules.

Campus Heights has several rules that are mostly ignored. The neighborhood covenant was written back when it was a preferred subdivision in this classic college town. Now student apartments and frat houses surround it, and most influential university faculty and staff live further out. There are no longer any annual neighborhood association fees at Campus Heights. Consequently there are no funds to maintain the once quaint neighborhood and its signature entranceway, curvy streets, unusual red picket fencing, garden areas, and walking paths.

Edward knows he can't drift off now. Dr. Hairston is looking directly at him and says she has more questions for him.

First, she starts an overhead projector that displays something on the big screen in front of the room for all to see. It's Edward's electronic portfolio.

"So, Mr. Grace, you complied with the university requirements to create an electronic portfolio of your academic and professional accomplishments at HU, correct?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Is this your portfolio?"

"Yes ma'am."

Dr. Hairston then pages through the portfolio, revealing Edward's entries about his academic and extracurricular activities. The portfolio shows Edward's coursework, major projects, senior thesis topic, internships, clubs, professional associations, and career interests. It all seems very well done and very impressive.

Then Dr. Hairston clicks on the tab labeled COMMUNITY SERVICE in the portfolio template. The page is blank.

"Mr. Grace, why is this important section blank?"

The entire room erupts in laughter at Edward's response, which he makes innocently and without any attempt to be funny or disrespectful.

"Oh. I apologize. I should have inserted my statement there."

Irene returns with her sheets and finds the two detectives hard at work at her table, sipping the fresh coffee she made for them.

“We have a plan to catch the white whale,” Walter proudly exclaims.

“The what?”

“The white whale. That’s what we’re calling him – or her. It’s our code name.” Chuck’s explanation has Irene shaking her head in amazement.

“OK, Sherlock, what’s the plan?”

Even though Irene was looking at Chuck when she said Sherlock, Walter jumps in to outline the plan.

“We’re going to get Ed Baron’s permission to tear up the garden in the front corner of his yard. It’ll look like a car cut the corner too sharp and took out some plants. We’ll have a stakeout on his front porch and be able to nab the white whale when he comes to fix it.”

Irene can’t believe what she has just heard.

“This is your plan? You guys are crazy, and so is Ed Baron if he goes along with this stupid idea.”

Walter and Chuck respond almost simultaneously, “Got any better ideas?”

Irene pulls up a chair and joins her friends at the table.

“Yeah, I do. Didn’t you morons notice the repaired fence hasn’t been painted yet? All you have to do is wait for the green hornet to come back to paint it.”

“The *white whale*,” Walter and Chuck respond emphatically and again almost simultaneously.

“Whatever.” Irene is both amused and annoyed. “You can see the fence from here if you look out the back window.”

There’s a pause as the two old guys look at each other and then at Irene.

“That might work,” Walter reluctantly admits.

Chuck seems disappointed but agrees.

Even Dr. Hairston got a chuckle from Edward’s remark about his written statement, recognizing the innocence of his answer. But that doesn’t mean she is about to lighten up. On the contrary, Dr. Hairston is ready to finish off young Edward.

“Mr. Grace, did you take calculus at HU?”

“Yes ma’am.

“Why did you take calculus, Mr. Grace?”

“It’s required in my major.”

“Is the calculus course listed on your transcript with a grade?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Why didn’t you simply submit a statement that you know calculus?”

“I don’t understand, Dr. Hairston.”

“I’m asking why you submitted a statement saying you met the community service requirement with no proof or documentation, but you didn’t do the same for the calculus requirement.”

“I suppose there has to be an official record of my performance.”

“Exactly, Mr. Grace.”

Walter volunteers to take the first watch. He and Chuck think the white whale will be back soon to finish the job. Irene can’t bring herself to call the object of their search the white whale, but she agrees the do-gooder will make another appearance shortly.

From the tiny breakfast nook in the rear of Irene’s house, the corner fence is barely visible. The binoculars purchased in 1981 by Irene’s late husband come in handy.

Irene surprises Walter and Chuck by saying she will take a turn in the watch rotation. Secretly, she is as interested as her friends in the unfolding mystery. For all three this adventure has become a welcome break from the usual monotony.

As if to beat a dead horse, Dr. Hairston now proudly displays on the overhead projector national rankings and other press clippings about community service at Humanity University. The school’s service requirement has drawn national attention and praise. Several publications refer to it as a model for higher education, and HU is ranked among the top five “Universities that Care.”

Next, she shows profiles of famous alumni. Many are well known government officials and business leaders. She shows a video featuring testimonials from several of these prominent grads. Each praises the school for its emphasis on service and describes the positive influence it

has made on their career and life. Edward has seen this video before at halftime of televised athletic contests.

With the very compelling video, Dr. Hairston concludes her presentation.

The chairman of the appeals committee stands to thank Dr. Hairston. It's not clear if he is thanking her for her thoroughness or for finally finishing.

The chairman looks at Edward, who has seemed almost lifeless during the entire proceeding.

"Unless you have something to say, Mr. Grace, the hearing will be concluded and the committee will begin its deliberations."

Edward hesitates for a moment, but then slowly rises. He knows he must now speak.

Walter is glued to the back window on the first watch. Chuck had to leave to run a few errands, while Irene remains busy around the house with her normal chores. It's a two-hour rotation. Chuck is expected back for his turn, which starts in about an hour. Then Irene is up. They haven't discussed what happens if the stakeout goes well into the night.

Walter perks up each time a car goes by. So far, they have all been false alarms. He is amazed at how much traffic goes down the street and alley behind Irene's house, and how fast the students drive.

As Edward rises, he gets his first glimpse of the audience. His seat is in the first row and he hasn't really seen the overflow crowd behind him. Now, as he is about to speak, he is facing the audience and almost becomes unglued.

He knows he can't match the articulate and ever confident Dr. Hairston, and that by speaking he may make a fool of himself. He can't help but think that Dr. Hairston has already painted him as a fool, and he suspects the audience agrees.

He gathers himself before attempting to talk.

He decides that his personal convictions are important, and that he will simply be himself.

There are times when human beings rise to the occasion, doing something they may have thought not possible for them to do. This is such a moment for Edward Grace. The student is about to become the teacher.

I strongly agree with the ideal of community service, and I promise you I have tried my best to live up to that ideal – as much or more than any student at HU. But I chose not to compile a portfolio of my service activities because I believe that we should not seek recognition from our service to others.

If we are taught to document every act of service and keep a personal scorecard to compare with others, what are we really doing? I think we are more engaged in self-promotion than public service.

Let's be honest. It has become far too easy for HU students to acquire documentation of service activities, even if those activities are superficial and require very little effort or time. The school actually encourages this behavior and benefits from it. We all know HU compiles and publishes the service activities submitted by students, faculty and staff to gain national exposure, rankings, and financial support.

I am proud to say that my service activities come from the heart and are not about self-promotion or institutional advancement.

I apologize for any trouble I may have caused.

There is complete silence in the room. After what seems like a long pause, the chairperson thanks Edward and tells him the committee will meet and will inform him of its decision within 24 hours.

The meeting adjourns and the committee moves to a smaller conference room for its deliberations. Despite the length of the hearing -- it has been nearly two hours now -- the crowd lingers. Most are sitting or standing in silence trying to process what they just heard.

It's early evening and there has been no sign of the white whale. Even though Irene has finally gotten with the program, she is determined that there will be no all-nighter at her house.

"8 PM is it. If there is no white whale by 8 PM, then the stakeout is off, at least for today."

“Fine by me,” Chuck responds with Walter’s approval. Chuck and Walter aren’t having as much fun as they anticipated. Chuck has a stiff neck from his shift at the watch, and Walter is just getting bored. Irene insisted on having the afternoon soap operas on TV, even during her turn on the watch.

They all agree to resume the watch in the morning.

“Tomorrow is the day. I can feel it.” Walter thinks they will all be refreshed after a break and will again be fired up about solving the mystery.

Walter never sleeps late and wants to get an early start. “I can be here by 8 AM. Is that OK, Irene?”

“That works. I’m always up early. I’ll even make some breakfast.”

Chuck is good with the breakfast offer but wonders, “Do you really think a student will show up that early?”

“We don’t know if the white whale is a student,” Irene fires back, surprising herself by using the code name.

Walter agrees.

8 AM it is.

At 7:45 PM Edward’s cell phone rings. He is back at his apartment, with boxes stacked everywhere.

“Hello. This is Edward.”

Edward listens as the party on the other end talks. He does not appear to be upset or surprised by what he hears coming through his phone.

“Yes sir. I understand.”

The party on the other end continues.

“No sir. I don’t have any questions.”

The one-way conversation is about over.

“I appreciate the phone call. Thank you.”

Edward has just learned that the appeals committee voted to give him the opportunity to submit a community service portfolio, even though the deadline for the upcoming graduation ceremony passed six weeks ago. Dr. Daniel Moore, HU vice president of academic affairs, told Edward that an exception will be made in his case, allowing him to walk in the graduation ceremony if his service portfolio is received by May 15, which is three days from now. An

official letter is on its way to Edward with the details.

Edward continues packing immediately after getting off the phone. He has already settled his apartment lease, submitted his transfer application to a nearby state university, and loaded his limited furniture items on his bright red pickup truck. He has a few errands to run and some unfinished business before heading out early in the morning.

There is no way Edward Grace is going to submit a community service portfolio.

At 7:15 AM the next day Walter Dawson is already on his way to Irene's house. Walter has never been late to anything in his life, and Irene knew when he said 8 AM it meant 7:30. She is the same way, and is already up and preparing breakfast, with an occasional look out the kitchen window for the white whale. Chuck, on the other hand, probably won't show up until at least 8:15 AM.

Even though they live only two houses apart, Walter and Chuck drive in separate cars to Irene's. One reason was just mentioned – Walter is always an early arriver while Chuck perpetually runs late. The other reason is that they both want flexibility to bail out if today is as boring as yesterday.

That won't be the case.

Walter parks in front of Irene's house so his car will not be visible from the corner fence. He walks around back and something grabs his attention. He hears what sounds like a car door slamming and a few other noises.

He can see something is happening at the fence and hurries to get there. Irene spots Walter through the window and notices he is walking as fast as he can – which isn't very fast – toward the fence. She quickly goes out the back door and easily overtakes Walter in her rush to reach the corner.

Irene is the first to get there as a truck pulls away. Chuck is not far behind but is out of breath as usual. He collects himself and asks Irene if she got the license number.

She shakes her head. "I couldn't see the license plate. The tailgate was down and the truck pulled out pretty fast. I think he saw us coming."

"Did you actually see the white whale?" Walter struggles to get the question out.

Again, Irene shakes her head. "No. All I saw was a red pickup. Whoever it was also delivers furniture."

"We missed our chance. It's over." Walter seems crushed and blames himself for not

getting there in time.

Chuck arrives earlier than expected and they all inspect the fence. It is painted red and matches perfectly the other sections that weren't damaged. The three retirees know it takes special effort and care to match new and old paint like that.

No wonder there was a delay in painting the fence. The white whale needed time to match the sample of old paint with the new.

Chuck looks closely as though he is some type of expert on paint. For some reason, he tests the paint by putting his hand on the fence. When he pulls it back, the palm side of his hand is completely red while the fence shows a clear hand imprint with amazing detail.

Walter scolds him. "Brilliant, Chuck. Just brilliant."

"No. No. It *is* brilliant," Irene responds. "Chuck, sometimes you amaze me."

"Huh?" Chuck isn't sure whose side Irene is on.

"Don't you see," Irene explains. "You ruined his paint job. If the white whale is as good as we think he'll be back to touch it up."

"That's what I was thinking," Chuck says sheepishly.

The stakeout is back on!

The campus of Humanity University is abuzz with talk about the hearing. The curious case of Edward Grace has gotten everyone's attention.

The issue is not the committee's decision or the final outcome of the case. Almost everyone agrees that Edward got a fair hearing and was given a reasonable option. He made his decision and has to live with it.

It's about the community service requirement itself.

The president, vice president for academic affairs, student government leaders, and faculty senators are all studying the school's community service requirement and how it is implemented. As is typical in a university setting, different groups are studying the issue and they plan to bring their various recommendations to the table.

A special task force is formed to bring together the different inputs and make a recommendation to the president. The president may or may not choose to bring any recommendations to the board for approval. Ultimately, the trustees will have to approve any major policy change about something so important and ingrained in the culture of the school.

It's not clear if anything will result from the review. One thing is certain, though. HU

officials are honorable people who want to do the right thing for their school, its students, and constituents.

A few days pass with the stakeout team on a regular watch rotation, but there is no sign of the white whale. Weeks go by and the detectives have given up hope. No more miracles are occurring in Campus Heights.

Walter, Chuck, and Irene occasionally walk down to the corner fence. They are amazed at the clarity of the handprint remaining on the new part of the fence.

They are resigned to the fact that they missed their chance.

The white whale, if there ever was such a thing, is never to be seen or heard from again.

Life in Campus Heights seems less exciting.

Several months later Humanity University makes major headlines with its new *Integrity Initiative in Institutional Reporting*. At a time when several universities have gotten in hot water for falsely reporting data that led to high rankings, HU publishes new guidelines and documentation requirements for its highly acclaimed community service program.

The new documentation rules require students to meet established time requirements on each service project and to produce evidence that each project provided significant benefits to those served. The individual contribution of each person on a team project now must be clearly reported and certified. In addition, the source of any funds used in a community service project must be reported.

The HU community service portfolio template was updated to reflect the more rigorous reporting standards. The template will now automatically reject a service entry unless all certifying data are presented and supporting electronic documents attached.

National news organizations and professional societies are giving high praise to the new requirements at Humanity, calling the school a leader not only in community service but also in institutional integrity.

HU President Marshall McClain has appeared on several national cable television news programs this month to laud his school and its unique community service program.

In addition, HU recently announced sponsorship of an annual conference on community

service in higher education, expected to draw even further national attention by attracting over 100 representatives from other universities to the campus.

At each annual conference the recipient of a new award -- the Humanity Citizenship Award -- is to be presented. The award will be given each year to the HU graduating senior with the best community service portfolio, as judged by a panel of faculty, students, and administrators. A \$10,000 prize will accompany the award, funded by donations from several philanthropic groups.

Also, architectural plans were revealed for a new monument to community service that will be erected at the main entrance to the campus. The name of each winner of the Humanity Citizenship Award will be engraved on the monument below a massive center stone displaying the words: *Community service is ingrained in the culture of Humanity University.*

The HU task force is working to develop an automated point system that will help quantify selection of the Humanity Citizenship Award winner and other future awards the school may create as incentives for students to engage in service. Points will be awarded based on data reported about the time commitment and significance of each project, with bonus points to be added if the student(s) raised funds to perform the service. The school sees the service evaluation model as a work in progress that could have market potential as other colleges increase their commitment to community service.

Despite the increased rigor in reporting and documentation requirements, or maybe because of them, HU officials expect a significant increase in community service activity on campus. The HU Board of Trustees recently announced a goal to increase community service activities by 20% over the next two years.

President McClain notes in the current issue of the alumni magazine that HU students love a challenge and will be highly motivated by the competitive aspect of the Humanity Citizenship Award and other awards soon to be announced as funding permits.

Somewhere, Edward Grace is thinking they may have missed the point.

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About the Author

Larry LaForge spent thirty-five years in higher education as a teacher, researcher, and active member of the academic community. He taught business management courses at every level from undergraduate students to doctoral students, received major research grants, published in top journals, directed dissertations, and served on editorial boards. He also advised student organizations, chaired major campus committees, and worked closely with athletics as a faculty representative to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

Dr. LaForge received significant professional awards during his academic career. Clemson University named him *Alumni Distinguished Professor of Management* for his work with undergraduate students. The Clemson faculty recognized him with the *Class of 1939 Award for Excellence*, their highest honor. Student government at Clemson honored him with the *Prince Award for Innovation in Teaching*, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching named him *1995 South Carolina Professor of the Year*.

He received his B.S. from Clemson, and his MBA and Ph.D. from the University of Georgia.

As an independent writer, Larry LaForge draws on his experiences in higher education and college sports to create stories that illustrate interesting issues and dilemmas in our times.

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