

The Forest and the Trees
By Timothy X. Troy



Inquires:
Timothy X. Troy
32 Elgin Road/ Flat 14
Ballsbridge
Dublin D04 H5NO
Ireland
+1 353 87 427 0995
Timothy.x.troy@lawrence.edu

The Forest and the Trees, by Timothy X. Troy

A two-act drama.

3(F), 2(M) Three settings. Act1 = 50 mins, Act 2 = 50 mins

Synopsis:

Competition for a government grant can bring out the best, and the worst, in the applicants, as well as the grant administrators. A prestigious urban forestry grant brings a dance artist, a librarian, an outdoor educator, and an environmental scientist into the fray of party politics, the culture wars, and ... the best of ourselves as citizens, friends, and colleagues.

Characters:

Martin Linnet –

Black, cis het male 38. Naturalist. Former college athlete (rugby). Army (Ranger) veteran, Outdoor educator.

Samantha Abril –

Latinx, cis het female 35. Immigrant from Argentina. Salsa dance instructor. Librarian and grant writer for an urban library system.

Kendi Paxton –

White, non-binary, late -20's. Vector biologist for the state forestry management agency. Government name is Kendrick, also Kenny, Rikki.

Wendy Simith –

White, cis het female 33. Arts educator and professional dancer. Raised in a survivalist cult.

Betsy Sayles –

White, cis het female, 60. Inherited wealth. Serves on several arts boards. Excitement induced echolalia (habitual repetition of what another person has just said.) Member of Blue Ribbon Commission to distribute US Forestry Service block grants to states for urban forestry initiatives.

Setting:

Mid-March, the near future. A Thursday from 10am to 7:30pm. US Northern city.

Scenes A & D small conference room in Central Public Library.

Scenes B & E The Hub – a business district shared workspace.

Scenes C & E Multipurpose room at same library.

Preference Falsification (Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies*, 1995). To deliberately project a contrived opinion. The burden of “living a lie.”

Act 1

Scene A: 10am. A small conference room in an urban central public library. Open proposals, other files, on a side table. Martin Linnet and Samantha Abril. She coaches him as they practice a partner dance (tango or salsa).

Sil-va-cul-ture

MARTIN

Sivee-culture.

SAMANTHA

Silva. Culture. Silviculture.

MARTIN

Silvaculture.

SAMANTHA

MARTIN

From Silvics. A term of art, invented by the forest service 100 years ago. Forest ecology. Silviculture: the ecological considerations of a discrete stand of trees, urban or rural.

It's hard to say.

SAMANTHA

It's the word we use. I didn't make it up.

MARTIN

Should I use this word now? It's not in the proposal.

SAMANTHA

MARTIN

Doesn't matter. It's what you're doing. It'll sound right. Sayles doesn't know a thing about it, but you want it on the recording for the panel review.

SAMANTHA

I'm supposed to use this word later today like I know what I'm saying? I have never heard this word. Do English speakers use this word?

MARTIN

When they are talking about forestry they do.

Dios mio.

SAMANTHA

(They share a knowing smile. Chuckle. Dancing is done.)

SAMANTHA

You're kind to meet with me on this project. And to come to mine. Really nice.

MARTIN

Free Salsa lesson.

SAMANTHA

Best if this meeting is just part of a routine day, you know?

MARTIN

I don't.

SAMANTHA

This proposal is in the pipeline. In the office. I've not been fully ... disclosed about the particulars. So, that's why I need you.

MARTIN

You've always been so supportive. I'm happy to help. Thanks for the parking spot. I didn't know that parking area even existed. Guess I've walked past it. Never noticed.

SAMANTHA

I need this to work. I need it to work without anybody knowing the details until ... it's done. Money in the pipeline. A budget line that's already there, before they take up the case.

MARTIN

I just did a quick read. I didn't crunch your numbers.

SAMANTHA

Don't touch the numbers.

MARTIN

OK.

SAMANTHA

I want as little attention drawn to it as possible. I just want the grant. I want the check to come in. I don't care if it's a large or small grant. I'll tell the accountants to establish a new budget line. Done. Then I want everyone to forget it until ... the right time. And it's just there, waiting. Do you see any red flags?

MARTIN

Not a red flag thing, is it?

SAMANTHA

Just the right terms.

MARTIN

Like silviculture?

SAMANTHA

Like that. I don't know enough.

MARTIN

My proposal is for a silviculture project.

SAMANTHA

Oh, my ... I don't want to steal anything! But I couldn't steal anything, 'cause I didn't know what silvaculture was anyway. This is all wrong.

MARTIN

You're not stealing. It's what you're describing without saying so.

SAMANTHA

Is that the only thing I'm describing? Do I describe it wrong?

MARTIN

No. It's modest. It's straight-forward. It's fine.

SAMANTHA

But it's lacking.

MARTIN

I'm not clear about the site. You give GPS coordinates, but this is an urban plat, right? There *is* an address, right? A regular municipal address. I didn't look up the coordinates, but I know it's in the city. Near south side?

SAMANTHA

There was a GPS field in the application. So, I used that.

MARTIN

Because it's a Forest Service form. You might need to refer to a sector in a National Forest when you need GPS, but these are urban projects. Yours is an urban project.

SAMANTHA

Forest Service. Know your audience. Write to the Forest Service.

MARTIN

Your immediate audience is Betsy Sayles.

SAMANTHA

Sayles. Right.

MARTIN

Are you trying to get something past Betsy Sayles?

SAMANTHA

What are you saying, Martin? Don't say that. It's not like that.

MARTIN

You know how connected she is, right?

SAMANTHA

No.

MARTIN

She's super-connected. Her family name is all over a ton of programs. Two of mine.

SAMANTHA

Is that the Blue Ribbon thing?

MARTIN

I'm talking about her family foundation. The Blue Ribbon Commission controls block grants to states.

SAMANTHA

Are you a Blue Ribbon thing?

MARTIN

County Fair? Best strawberry preserves? Are you kidding?

SAMANTHA

The presentation meeting is here. I nudged that, through my boss.

MARTIN

I assumed you did.

SAMANTHA

I found out about the block grants like you did. They assume I'm getting ready to be the on-site host is all.

MARTIN

It's not right. This is part of the whole "devolve to states" strategy. It's federal money. A federal agency should control it, right? Now they drop a tranche to eligible states, then the assembly committees take over.

SAMANTHA

Do I need to use that “tranche” word?

MARTIN

No. So, each state decides what to do with us. Not coordinated regionally. A forest, a waterway, they don't care if they cross a state line. Did you see how many proposals are “out state” based? We're just the city and suburb proposals. Did you notice that Chippecotton River proposal?

SAMANTHA

No.

MARTIN

Clearly a coordinated effort to put that on our slate. There's only four from here. Might be five. We have a good shot at full funding, actually. They have to give something to the cities. Most of it will go to places that don't need it. Deer Farms.

SAMANTHA

Deer Farms? Oh, wait. You mean those places that grow deer in a fenced field. Then people pay them to hunt the deer, ya know, inside the fence.

MARTIN

Drinking beer and listening to Ted Nugent. Hunting deer with assault rifles.

SAMANTHA

Porca miseria! Is that even hunting?

MARTIN

Wild Turkey. Ducks. That's the point. Fish in a barrel.

SAMANTHA

So, the notice for access to the grants is purposely hidden?

MARTIN

In plain sight. You have to know where to look. Most people don't.

SAMANTHA

But they make sure their people know. I thought we left this behind in Argentina.

MARTIN

Personal memos to their people on city and county councils all over the state, meanwhile we get a notice in the newspaper that's about “that” big (*It is tiny*). How'd you find it.

SAMANTHA

This is what I do. How did you?

MARTIN

Email from Sayles' assistant.

SAMANTHA

What?!

MARTIN

She's into two of our programs already, so their office sends opps to ... you know ... "her people."

SAMANTHA

You're "her people"?

MARTIN

Hah! A tiny little corner in a very large ven diagram.

SAMANTHA

So, basically, you're in.

MARTIN

I don't think of it that way. These reviewers should be faceless experts, staff, and former grantees from the Service.

SAMANTHA

Now, that's the Blue Ribbon thing, right?

MARTIN

Right. Appointees. Friends of friends in the party apparatus.

SAMANTHA

I read the bios. None of them seem to be content experts. Not a one. I wondered if it might help my case.

MARTIN

A thin bio is your first clue of a political appointment. The thinner the better.

(Grabs a presentation folder with Samantha's proposal.)

Here we go, you taught me this drill. Walk through the criteria and check if your proposal links with the guidelines.

SAMANTHA

Basics.

MARTIN

Right.

SAMANTHA

I spend so much time preparing these submissions with other people's narratives and data. You don't see your own thing, ya know?

MARTIN

The forest for the trees.

SAMANTHA

That's why I asked you here today. And to see you. Thanks.

MARTIN

(He reads from the grant application.) "Further the basic statutory mission of the Forest Service. 30%."

SAMANTHA

(*She reads from her proposal*) Preserve a modest parcel of urban forest.

MARTIN

It's a "stand".

SAMANTHA

OK. I can call it a "stand" in my presentation?

MARTIN

Right. (*She makes notes.*) Preserve a modest parcel - a modest urban stand - *Prepare* a modest urban stand.

SAMANTHA

Not preserve?

MARTIN

No. Don't emphasize "preserve."

SAMANTHA

But I say "preserve." That's what they'll read.

MARTIN

Get the right word on the recording. It'll be transcribed. It's likely that the transcription is what they'll review before they vote. Say, "prepare". That's what they'll read or listen to at the most important time.

SAMANTHA

Transcription?

MARTIN

Of the recording. That's what they do now.

SAMANTHA

You mean like voicemail transcriptions that are so ridiculous? I had one the other day. It said, "Meet Sting at the bowling broom." What does this have to do with grant reviews? "Meeting at the board room," is what it was trying to say. Those systems are hopeless with Spanish.

MARTIN

These systems are specifically for meetings. They use AI to learn vocabulary. So, I plan and choose words that I think will transcribe more accurately.

SAMANTHA

Like silvaculture?

MARTIN

Pick and choose. Be strategic. There is not a good substitute for "silvaculture."

SAMANTHA

I'll say "prepare" even though I wrote "preserve."

MARTIN

It'll be fine. Preserve is not a bad word: it's not the right word. It's just that ... it's the *silviculture* thing.

SAMANTHA

Caca. I'm in trouble.

MARTIN

You're really not.

SAMANTHA

But why not "preserve"?

MARTIN

It's not the standard in the field anymore. "Preserve" implies keeping a thing like it was or returning to a natural state. But nothing is in a natural state in that sense. Every ecological system has already been altered. Especially an urban stand. What silviculture does is help you see the parcel as a changing, evolving, developing system.

SAMANTHA

(*Taking notes.*) ...changing and evolving. That's good.

MARTIN

What's the story, Samantha? I saw you at Pritchard Branch shortly after.

SAMANTHA

After what?

MARTIN

After us. You know what I'm talking about.

SAMANTHA

You didn't say "Hi"?

MARTIN

You were with someone. A family. Surprised to see you there. Didn't make sense. Wasn't sure it was you 'til I was on my way out.

SAMANTHA

Two days a week and one weekend day per month. The other half of my time is here – grants and special projects. I consult at the State library once per month, building Spanish language resources, local history, Latinx history in the state.

MARTIN

Nice variety.

SAMANTHA

We commit to have at least one Spanish speaker at Pritchard whenever it's open - including Sundays. Northside and Pritchard are the only two open on Sundays all year. You could have said "Hi, '*buenas dias*', *que tál*," you know.

MARTIN

I have no confidence in my Spanish. I hear Spanish. I open my mouth, and out comes Italian.

SAMANTHA

I remember.

MARTIN

I'm sure you do.

SAMANTHA

Argentine Spanish is so full of idiom and quirky consonants. Mexicans and Centro-Americans, they look at me funny. "You're not us", I hear them thinking.

MARTIN

Someone is in. Someone is out.

SAMANTHA

Argentina: the country built by Italian and German immigrants. A lot like here, actually.

MARTIN

And former Nazi's

SAMANTHA

"A very palpable hit."

MARTIN

"Et tu, Brute?" Wait, that's a different play, right?

SAMANTHA

My people were not the *Perónistas*. They arrived just as that all started. Imagine escaping from Mussolini and finding yourself in Perón-land.

MARTIN

There's a fine "how do you do?"

SAMANTHA

Only thing they had going for them was they weren't there long enough to be on one side or another. "We learned to say nothing." Not being native Spanish speakers got them out of all kinds of trouble, according to my *Papi*. That's how you covered your tracks when you said the wrong thing. "I'm just learning your Spanish. I meant to say ..." whatever it was they had been coached to say.

MARTIN

Survivors: they knew how to survive. I'm always nice.

SAMANTHA

You're always charming, is what you are. There's a difference.

MARTIN

Are we doing this here? Now?

SAMANTHA

I was ready to unguard my honor.

MARTIN

I stayed in my lane.

SAMANTHA

I invited you into my heart, Martin. We danced so well together, we might as well have, you know, taken the next steps. It would have been easy.

MARTIN

You were smoother than I.

SAMANTHA

You're better than you think. If you stuck with it.

MARTIN

If I stuck with us, you mean.

SAMANTHA

So, I wasn't making it up? You thought, maybe, us?

MARTIN

Ah, hell yes, Samantha! Now, you're confusing me. It was all Steven this, and Stevie that and I'm meeting his parents, and I'm cooking with his *abuela*. Damn. I wasn't going to interfere with that.

SAMANTHA

You were a perfect gentleman.

MARTIN

Yeah. I did that. I was trying to learn what it meant to be an adult civilian. To have relationships that lasted longer than a deployment. To buy my own bed. A couch. All that shit.

SAMANTHA

And start an organization all by yourself. You did that. You did it very well. You must be proud.

MARTIN

Of myself? We wouldn't want that now, would we?

SAMANTHA

You need a little Latin male, *braggadocio*.

MARTIN

And now she's speaking Italian at me! Hold the phone.

SAMANTHA

I thought you'd like that. Sometimes I wonder what planet you came from.

MARTIN

The Army taught me the same things as my father. Do the thing you said you're going to do. Outdoor programming with kids is what I want to do, so it fits. Fifty years ago, someone like me couldn't do this. Not just the color thing and the Redlining, but the businesses. They couldn't hear about pollution or reclamation. They only understood the outdoors as the cabin "up north." Or the state parks, or the trip to Yellowstone. Outdoors wasn't in the city. Outdoors in the city meant you'd get wet when it rains and turn on the air conditioner when it's hot. My program is all based on the system of the county parks. I didn't start it from nothing. Thank God for those guys who built the parks. Whitmore. What a vision. Impossible if we tried to start from nothing now. We're learning to mitigate and adapt. The people in Detroit doing this work are the heroes. They're making farms and prairies in the municipal limits of Motor City. It's crazy.

SAMANTHA

Listen to you. I'll be proud for you. Always am. Steven and I follow your posts. "We know that guy."

MARTIN

It's like playing Rugby in America - an alternative sport with scholarship opportunities that aren't as overcrowded as so many others.

SAMANTHA

Smart man.

MARTIN

The kids are smart. I discovered that when I got the tweens involved; they know about all that social media. Black and Brown children's faces smiling, surrounded by nature. It's very grant friendly.

SAMANTHA

But it's honest, too.

MARTIN

It's honest, too. Has to be, or it'll come back to bite you. Keep it simple is the key. Don't say too much.

SAMANTHA

Like my proposal.

MARTIN

What is going on here, Sami? There's something you're not saying.

(End of Scene A.)

*Scene B: 11:00am. The Hub, a shared workspace in a converted warehouse.
Martin Linnet and Kendi Paxton, later Wendy Simith.*

MARTIN
Hey, it's Kendi! Hiya doin'?

KENDI
Martin! You are a beautiful human.

MARTIN
Likewise, likewise.

KENDI
Connie tells me you're in new digs.

MARTIN
Naw, it's the same. We like it. It's all good.

KENDI
She was talking about a view of the river and Riverwalk paths.

MARTIN
Oh, that! I thought you meant the office. Yes, yes – it's the new apartment.

KENDI
You like it?

MARTIN
More space. More light for all the Zoom and remote stuff.

KENDI
And the podcast. It's great. You do it from home, then?

MARTIN
You're listening? It's way more work than it seemed before we started. I was reluctant, but my board was ... appeal to younger generation ... blah, blah. Thought I'd go straight to WNYC studios. I wasn't against it, but ... sitting indoors and editing is not my thing.

KENDI
The outreach is great.

MARTIN
Exactly. I knew they were right. It was the getting started. But twice per month seems like enough. I don't really know what I'm doing.

KENDI

Can't tell.

MARTIN

There are a few interviews that never made it into the program. They sucked and I sucked. Sometimes it's people I know can talk. I've heard them talk. You go to teachers and professors and organization leaders. I've heard them all talk. I guess, once the microphone is "on", they freeze up. Start thinking about what they're saying and will it sound right when they listen later.

KENDI

Does it help with grants?

MARTIN

That's exactly it. Even if listener numbers are low, you can link to the podcasts on your applications.

KENDI

The reviewers!

MARTIN

Right. You need to do this, too. It's like magic. Since I started, not one has failed to say something positive about it in the evaluation.

KENDI

That's reach. We're like in the 1970's. Our whole communications team is still working on print manuals. Talk about wasting trees.

MARTIN

But then the state pays most of your bills. Do the trees come from state forests, I wonder?

KENDI

That would be too efficient.

MARTIN

I was surprised to see you in this grant pool. Did they send you? You here for an office colleague?

KENDI

A college friend is presenting for a Chippecotton River basin project. She might need help. Had to push myself here. For you, too. This is not our usual thing. My proposal is sound. I'll stand by it, but it's not strictly necessary for my research.

MARTIN

Don't you have statutory restrictions?

KENDI

Used to. Still do. This is part of what changed. "New initiatives." The grant has to result in a new budget line. But I'm trying to work in that area where hunting and the Department of Natural Resources meets woodlands and the Forestry Service. They cooperate with each other, but it could be more ... integrated.

MARTIN

The grant can't directly support operational costs.

KENDI

Exactly.

MARTIN

You're already state employees. With a budget. Tax dollars.

KENDI

Yep. It's strange. Resources from other departments, even.

MARTIN

So, what's the deal, Kendi? You're usually the type that's on the review panel.

KENDI

Truth.

MARTIN

C'mon. What does Sayles know about any of this?

KENDI

Nothing. That's the point. "An average citizen should understand ..."

MARTIN

She's not the average of anything.

KENDI

No, she isn't. Non-expert. Supposed to be better that way.

MARTIN

Damn! I hate this terrible trend. Non-experts mean they want people who know nothing about what they're doing.

KENDI

Underqualified for a job is the new qualification.

MARTIN

They just want to feel good about how ½ of them dropped out of college. They wear it as a badge of honor. When did that start?

KENDI

2010. 2008. Obama, right? Pushback.

MARTIN

You're right, I know. Still, it feels like a new thing. They'd have done us all a favor if they could just say, "I don't like that policy because I'm a racist motherfucker." Then we could have started a real conversation. We all know they want to diminish other people, but what's little known, is that they also hate the white people who live anywhere near the Back and Brown people. Like you.

KENDI

Preference falsification. Saying the thing the opposition wants to hear, as a way of hiding your true feelings. But you need to feel bad about it while you're doing it. I know all about it. It's how I lived until I was about twenty-five.

MARTIN

The truth that tells the lie.

KENDI

More like a lie that tells the truth.

MARTIN

There we go. What changed? How did you find the peace.

KENDI

Growing up. Great parents. Good friends. Education. Travel, really. It was my research time in West Africa.

MARTIN

I thought most of those cultures were all either/or about gender. One of the challenges, right?

KENDI

They are a very binary culture. But when you're an outsider they have no expectations. Second trip, when I was who I was, I returned to people who knew me already. I found they actually accepted me. More than I expected. They have a category for non-category.

MARTIN

We need that category for non-category. We loves our categories, our us-es and thems.

KENDI

So, we need to work around it. Sidestep. Be smarter than them.

MARTIN
That part you got. Not going to solve this today.

KENDI
It's why I wanted to talk to you before.

MARTIN
I wondered. Happy to see you, but I wondered.

KENDI
I saw your title and abstract. Great title, by the way.

MARTIN
"Stand, in the place where you learn."

KENDI
I caught the REM reference. Nice!

MARTIN
Thanks.

KENDI
Full points for Education and Outreach. 40% in the bag.

MARTIN
Connecting it to school property was, if I may say, brilliant.

KENDI
You may say. Send me the full proposal, I can use our inter-agency channels to get you consideration from our end.

MARTIN
No shit?

KENDI
It's a basic silviculture proposal for municipal property. If I'm reading it right.

MARTIN
You read it right.

KENDI
You'd be OK if it was statewide?

MARTIN
What do you mean, statewide?

KENDI

Like all over the state, you know – rural, exurban, suburban, urban. Everywhere. Add-up all the paved school playgrounds in every school district. This is thousands of acres of tree-cover you are proposing, Martin.

MARTIN

You're talking ... huge.

KENDI

As I think about it, this model has voltage and reach. It won't lose power as you scale-up.

MARTIN

Not any site will work.

KENDI

Sure, there's a limit to how small it can be and still sustain as a stand. But I see small, medium, and quite big ones. It's all in the Urban Forestry context, so it'll never –

MARTIN

Never get to forest management size.

KENDI

Right. It's not universal, but it can fairly be described as *ubiquitous*. Municipal code worthy.

MARTIN

OMG.

KENDI

For real. Your idea is that good. Through us, we can get it everywhere. They like this shit. It'll be the *Linnet Protocol for the Reclamation of School Habitat Act*, otherwise known as **Stand: in the place where you learn**. Wait 'til we get a picture of a linnet bird alighting the branch of a seedling with a primary school in the background. I can get it there. It'll be called a "Linnet Stand." You never knew your surname would be so handy.

MARTIN

Are you telling me to pull my proposal today.

KENDI

No, no, no. I'm saying both/and. You're going to get this thing. And more.

MARTIN

You know this?

KENDI

Pretty much. You should. You and your work ... we need you to pilot this thing. Get it started. You need the first few projects to document the steps, appropriate species, start the curriculum guides. It's a big gig. Make sure it's happening so we can "scale-up."

MARTIN

You mean, you and me.

KENDI

If you'll have me. But really, I mean us – the Department of Natural Resources. You may need to start a new job. You'll supervise people on this in 3-to-5 years.

MARTIN

I'm not going anywhere.

KENDI

Fine. I can do it if you want. You can appoint somebody later. My point for today, is what you're asking for is a start-up, proof-of-concept plan. But don't actually say that.

MARTIN

Sayles could fund the shit out of this.

KENDI

Right. Better yet; make her want to join us.

(Enter Wendy Simith with presentation materials and a covered bucket.)

KENDI

Hey, Wendy! What fun! *(Hugs, warm greetings.)* This is my colleague, Martin Linnet. Wendy Simith. We go way back. Back to when I was a boy-child.

MARTIN

Hiya, Wendy. I know your dance company through my wife, Connie. I saw the Three Bridges performance. You were in that, right?

WENDY

That was me.

MARTIN

What a thrill. I felt so 'in a place'. The river and even a warehouse and the sound of flowing water, and bamboo chimes. Y'all were IN the river. Barefoot and beautiful.

KENDI

I read about that. That's when I figured out we were in the same town.

MARTIN

The audience watched from the footbridges. Like we're floating along, suspended, perched like a bird. We moved from bridge to bridge as they proceeded downstream. Until you all disappeared - into the mist. The setting sun.

KENDI

A gentle midsummer breeze.

MARTIN

You got it. Like you were there.

WENDY

Still one of my favorite pieces. People who came tell us they felt special.

MARTIN

Yes, we did. It was righteous.

WENDY

We felt special, too.

KENDI

River is a theme for Wendy. She has a wetlands / river basin project. "Riparian Repair."

WENDY

The coffee/tea bar here is great. Scones and muffins. I find it hard to talk about proposals and things.

KENDI

Riparian: having to do with rivers. Drainage, embankments, water rights, land use, all that. Repair: now you take over.

MARTIN

Tell me. You're using the Chippecotton River, right?

WENDY

I'm inspired by Cristo – the artist who did *Running Fence*. He built a translucent fabric fence through towns and farmlands in Orange County, California, all the way into the sea. He wrapped islands and the Reichstag.

MARTIN

Like that woman who crocheted a giant doily and covered a tank.

KENDI

Like that.