

The Holy Fool

By Jason Liegois

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To all of the journalists past, present, and future, who
work to let us know what's going on in our world, no
matter what the cost.

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Author's Note

I've set this story, for the most part, in Chicago during late August and early September of 2008. In the process of writing that story, I have tried to keep the setting and events of those times as close to reality as practicable. Any discrepancies between the real events and features of those times and what you read here is either the result of an author's oversight or a sacrifice to the needs of fiction.

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Chapter 1

Aug. 31, 2008, Chicago, Ill.

As Sonny Turner walked up to his apartment building, his attention was on anything but his home. That wasn't a surprise, given that there was no one there waiting for him at home and he was positive that someone was following him.

Once he got within a block of his building, that feeling eased somewhat. The figure on foot that had followed him from the El station had disappeared a block back, and the vehicle that had passed him three separate times had finally headed westbound when he arrived at his block. He suspected they already had someone watching his apartment. With the row of three-decker apartment houses lining both sides of the street in his Wicker Park neighborhood, it would be easy to use a nearby apartment as a surveillance point.

It was quiet as Sonny approached the front stone steps of his building, only to see someone sitting down and blocking his path – just barely. The man there was well in his fifties, nearly six feet tall but with a bare bones physique. He was balding, with what was left of his hair a grey dusting across his shaved skull, and had what Sonny considered to be the saddest eyes he'd ever seen in a man – dark, sunken into the hollows of his eye sockets. Never the sharpest dressed man around; he awaited Sonny in a more casual than usual Bears navy starter jacket and faded jeans.

Sonny was an inch or two taller than his unexpected guest - a beer-barrel tank, with a thick chest, soft but solid contours, and short legs and arms. Slightly shaggy but not long brown hair and a full beard and squared face framed the dark eyes that glinted as he stared down at the man. "Damn, Gus, what are you doing out here near midnight?"

Arthur "Gus" Pulaski shot up, swiveling as he examined the street. "Need to talk, kid," his boss spit out. "Invite me in?"

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“I got your message three days ago; thanks for calling me. You and Ed were about the only ones I heard from.”

“Not about your mom – something else.”

“C’mon.” He gestured for Gus to follow him into the building. Deciding to forgo the freight elevator in back, he led Gus up the staircase to the right of the front door up to the third floor. Once they were there, Sonny made his way toward the door marked 4C. He examined the doorway and found a wooden wedge there, lodged in the crack between the door and doorjamb halfway up. He unlocked the doorway and, making sure his body screened Gus’s view, he pocketed the wedge and opened the door. “Get in.”

Gus followed Sonny in. Sonny’s place had only one bathroom and bedroom behind single doors. One wood table with two chairs occupied the kitchen nook at the far end of the apartment. The living area had three bare white drywalls and a brick wall facing the outside of the building. There was no other furniture, except for the roll-top desk and chair and the dresser and bed in his bedroom.

“Christ, aren’t you going to decorate this place sometime? How long have you been here, eight years?”

“10 years. I’ll decorate when I’m dead and have the time. Have a seat.” Sonny pointed to the kitchen table. “You want something to drink?”

“Some beer, if you have any – I didn’t drive here.” Gus wandered toward Sonny’s desk. “How was the funeral?”

“It worked out OK.” Sonny turned his back on his houseguest while he swiped a Samuel Adams and a Coke from the fridge.

Gus’ eye noticed a familiar photo framed on Sonny’s desk. It was a picture of a younger Sonny, without the beard, sandwiched between two older men in shirts and ties. Someone took it during a late night in a Rush Street bar. The man on Sonny’s left looked like a retired con man, silver-haired with a strong, jutting chin and with clothes just the right level of rumpled to look elegant. The man on the right just looked rumpled, heavier, with grey eyes that seemed to be scanning the room even as the picture was taken. Jack, Sonny,

and Ed On the Town a small note said on the frame of the small photo.

Gus sat down at the table as he stared at the photo. Sonny set down the drinks, then tossed something in front of Gus. “I appreciated the flowers and check you sent.”

Gus opened it. It was a visitation notice, filled with pictures from the past century. *Gail Turner, 1950-2008*, it read.

“So, what are you doing out here? Aren’t you supposed to be putting out the Monday edition?”

“Decided to take a day off from the *Journal* for once. I’ve got enough days for it.”

“Yeah, that makes total sense,” Sonny laughed. “But, Wicker Park’s not quite your scene, Gus. It’s rough out here, don’t you know that?”

“Hell, kid, it’s not Cabrini-Green.”

“Cabrini-Green’s just about torn down. Anyway, since you never show up around here, what the hell is your malfunction tonight?”

Gus leaned back in his chair, taking a long pull off his drink as Sonny sat down in front of him. “Something’s going down and I need your help to figure out what it is.”

“Hmm.” Sonny had a drink of his beer, and then stared right at Gus.

“I was up in the Penthouse late Friday, turning in some paperwork for HR, when I decided to use the executive restroom up there. It’s supposed to be for just the senior execs, but hell if I care. I’m in one of the far stalls when I hear a guy come in, start washing his hands, and then as he’s drying them, his cell phone rings and he answers it. It was John Michael.”

That caused Sonny to look up. It was the name everyone used for John Michael Edson, the CEO of Edson Media, the *Chicago Journal*’s owner for the past two years. “You could hear him?”

“He was talking low, but yeah. I stood on the throne and kept quiet as I could.”

“Well, that was your workout for the day,” said Sonny, taking a long drink from his beer. “Who called him?”

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“The name I don’t know, but from the conversation I heard, it was some guy from UUF Bank.”

“Ah, our favorite hometown bank slash Wall Street wannabe.”

“I wasn’t able to catch it all, but I heard him specifically say, ‘I need the valuation report for the *Journal* done by tomorrow, understand?’ My gut says that he’s looking to sell.”

“Sell? He just bought the paper two years ago. You get that idea just from that?”

“From that, from the spending cuts, and from the next round of staff cuts that’s apparently starting this week. Anyway, this is your new project.”

“What?”

“Despite that column of yours, you’re still a good investigative reporter.” Gus drained the rest of his Coke and got up to start circling around the table. “I want you to start looking into this. I need to find out about what John Michael’s plans are.”

“What? Excuse me, brother,” Sonny laughed, “But when did you start acting all renegade? You’re not even sure you want me to go ahead with this whole other thing..”

“Look, kid, drop it.” Gus spun around and pointing at him. “I’m willing to talk about that, but this is more important. This isn’t just a story – it’s our jobs, and the jobs of our co-workers.”

Sonny sighed. “You really think there’s something to this?”

“Three weeks from now, the paper’s going to celebrate its 140th anniversary. I want to at least know if it’s going to have a 141st. This has been my life for the past 35 years.”

“You said it yourself; these newspapers close all the time. You told me about the Chicago *Sentinel* closing in the 60’s. What are we going to do?”

“This paper, the guys who wrote for it, helped make you into what you are.” Gus pointed at the picture on Sonny’s desk. “Can you help?”

Sonny stared at his beer for a moment, took another drink, looked over at the photo on the desk, then back at Gus. “Coming back here, I just realized you and Ed might be the

only people I have left. Isn't that just fucked? OK, I'll start tomorrow. But, we're going to talk about the other project."

"We will, but this is the bigger priority, even over your column."

"Well, hell, I'll have to start subcontracting that out to the Indian grad students again." He got up and shook Gus's hand. "I'll see you in the newsroom tomorrow?"

"Of course." Gus patted Sonny on the shoulder with his other hand. "Talk to me by midday at least and let me know where you're at."

"OK."

"Take care, kid."

As Gus walked out of the building, he wondered if he should have told him about the new kid coming to work tomorrow. He decided it was for the best that he didn't; he felt there was only so much Sonny could absorb.

After Gus left, Sonny sat down at his desk. The silence filled up the entire room, lit by just a single fluorescent bulb above his stove. It was right then that the isolation hit him. 50,000 followers on Twitter and he felt alone, and that thought and his laugh kept him company for a few seconds.

The only other light in the room was two LEDs on his landline, one flashing, located on his desk. He picked up the cordless receiver and punched a button next to the flashing LED.

After a beep, he heard a young woman's voice, dark and scratchy. "Sonny, still with us?" the message began. "It's Joey. Listen, I haven't heard from you in a while. Just... I was worried, OK? I was hoping everything's all right with you. I saw you run out Monday and not say anything to anyone. Call me? Bye."

He replaced the receiver, smiling. "She called. She called," he heard himself say aloud. He was scared when he burst into tears right after he said that, his fingers covering the LED light. "What the hell?" he muttered to himself. He was glad he had the blinds drawn, because he didn't want whoever was watching him to see this.

The kid Gus had thought of that evening started to stir in his bed the next morning just as the sun crept through the blinds of his apartment window.

Colton felt around for a familiar presence in the bed next to him but didn't find her. As he began to sit up in the bed, he heard a knock at the bedroom door. "Baby, you up?" a whispering female voice breathed from behind the door.

"Yeah, that you?"

With her foot, Kyra swung the door open and bounded in. Small-boned, somewhere just over five feet, with long black hair and wide blue eyes that reminded Colton of the anime characters he loved, she was already dressed for the day in a purple sweater, leggings, and leather boots. "I thought I'd be super nice and get breakfast all set before you headed out to work." She dropped a McDonald's bag by his lap and a McDonald's coffee cup in his hand.

"Wow, thank you." Colton took the briefest of sips and set the cup down. As she sat down on the bed, he leaned in for a kiss, which she accepted. "You're looking beautiful today. I don't suppose you wanted to take a moment and hang out before heading in..."

"Ooooo," she said, shaking her head in mock frustration, "I'm already dressed for school today." She was studying public policy at the University of Chicago, where he'd graduated that spring. She kissed him back on the lips. "You're so cute, of course, it's a temptation, but I've got to maintain that 4.0."

Kyra wasn't joking when she said she thought he was cute. He was six-three, short brown hair, a heart-shaped face topped with hazel eyes and a wide grin he popped out whenever he was happy or nervous. Many people mistook him for a basketball player or a distance runner, but he used a series of boards to shape his lean figure. There were the small boards in the summer for the streets of Chicago, slightly longer boards for the slopes, then an even longer board for the annual getaway to Hawaii.

"If you want to do something like that, we'll have to get to bed earlier and wake up earlier."

“I’m game. You eating with me today, at least?”

“Two egg McMuffin meals for the two of us. Also, I thought this might be required reading.” She took a newspaper with *Chicago Journal* written across it and dropped it on his lap.

“Good idea. If I’m going to work for this thing, I’d better know what we printed today.”

“So, have you found out what they’ll have you start doing?” Kyra said, as Colton got ready after breakfast.

“Not getting anyone’s coffee, I hope.” Colton finished tying his tie. He kept his outfit basic – black shirt and tie, khakis, and brown-suede shoes. “They wanted me to report to the city editor, Gus Pulaski, when I got in today, but that could mean anything.”

“One thing I do know,” Kyra said, sliding in behind him as he looked in the dresser mirror, “is that I hope this is what you want to do.”

“Yeah, it is, definitely.” Colton finished tying his tie and pulling her arms around him. “I want to work with my dad; I should know something about how it works. Letting people know about the world around them - to me, it always seemed worthwhile, and isn’t it natural to do what your parents did?”

“If you’re happy, I’m happy, then.”

He tossed a brown bomber jacket on his shoulders to finish off the outfit. “OK, off to the station, then.” They shared one more kiss.

With a coffee mug in one hand and a plate with a bagel and banana in the other, Sonny went back to his desk. He noticed that he was getting an alert on an e-mail message. He clicked on the tab:

7:30 a.m. Chicago time.

With that, Sonny began to open another tab on the browser. A notice saying ENCRYPTION COMPLETE popped up as Sonny opened the chat program. Waiting for him was this:

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<hewoman98> Ready to talk?

He sighed, then typed in:

<SonnyT76>Ready.

<hewoman98> Finally got back?

<SonnyT76>Yes

<hewoman98> sorry about mom again

<SonnyT76>Appreciated.

<hewoman98> You received the new package?

<hewoman98> 3/?

<SonnyT76>yes

<SonnyT76>in my possession, and saved to different places

<SonnyT76>3/? ????

<hewoman98> thought I would stop at 4 batches, but now decided I'd keep going and see how much I'd put out

<SonnyT76>Can't advise you on that one way or another.

<hewoman98> if you get them, you'll use them?

<SonnyT76>yes

<hewoman98> good boy.

<SonnyT76>Still trying to figure out who you might be. I know military, probably the Poly house. A lady for sure.

<hewoman98> More like the B word. You won't know until they finally catch me.

<SonnyT76>Prison sounds like fun to you?

<hewoman98> >>>Implying there's things that aren't scarier than prison

>>> Implying I haven't already been through it.

<SonnyT76>You've been to the Sandbox, then.

<hewoman98> Keep guessing. So, when am I going to see some scoops in print?

<SonnyT76>When I get through the material and make sure I won't get anyone killed if I dump it

<hewoman98> What's taking so long?

<SonnyT76>The number of documents you've dropped already? It might take me years if I go through it myself.

<hewoman98> I understand about troops, but don't worry about the rest of them. They're not worth it.

<SonnyT76>Terrorists? Civilians? American politicians?

<hewoman98> All of the above.

<hewoman98> 4/?

<SonnyT76>regular place

<hewoman98> regular time.

<hewoman98> This one's a doozy. FS cables. . .

<SonnyT76>These are just lying around?

<hewoman98> honey, you'd be surprised about how much of that "top secret" stuff just lies around.

<hewoman98> Signing off

Sonny logged off, closed the laptop, and started staring at the photo again as if to ask the men in it a question.

Chapter 2

It was less than an hour after Sonny had left his apartment, making sure to tuck the tiny wooden wedge into his doorway just below knee-height before leaving for work and the headquarters of the *Chicago Journal*.

As he later approached within two blocks of Lake Shore Drive, he noticed two men through his aviator sunglasses. He'd noticed them last night and long before then but made no effort to confront or even acknowledge them.

The first one was always on foot. His wardrobe vacillated between business casual and court deposition. He was in his forties, trim, with his grey hair trimmed military short. The Gentleman, as Sonny had nicknamed him in his mind, never had trouble keeping up with him on foot.

The other guy was in a grey Dodge coupe. He was in his forties too, but not as well preserved – rounder, balding but black hair, and a Ditka-shaped mustache. He'd seen the guy driving everything from a minivan to a gypsy cab, and he was the guy that usually tailed Sonny to just outside his apartment. He usually wore Bears or Cubs sports gear, although he had worn a Blackhawks jersey last Sunday. Sonny could not resist naming him The Superfan.

He was surprised that their presence no longer fazed him. It did make planning his daily schedule more challenging.

Colton got off at the Clark El stop. He knew that the *Chicago Journal's* headquarters was right nearby. He needed to go down to La Salle, then head north until he was right at the river.

As Colton turned the corner of La Salle, however, he knew that despite only having been there a few times, he would be able to get there without Google Maps. The home of the

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Chicago Journal loomed in front of him, overlooking the Chicago River.

The official name of the building was Journal Tower, but everyone in Chicago other than *Journal* executives called it The Keep. It was a monument in concrete, a massive rectangle that could have been Al Capone's idea of a castle fortification. Art Deco detail lined its walls, reaching for the sky, especially the four corners of the main building that were modern reflections of medieval turrets. A slightly smaller rectangle with smaller turrets, housing the company's executive offices, topped off the block. The Keep was never one of the tallest structures in Chicago, but it succeeded in being the most intimidating.

By the time Colton was beginning to come around the corner, Sonny was already inside the main lobby of the building and headed straight for the main elevators. As Sonny punched the button to bring down one of the eight elevators serving the building around its central core, he pulled out his Blackberry and noticed a text from Gus: *Stop over*.

Sonny got off at the 12th floor, home of the newsroom. Each department of the paper, such as advertising, circulation, and pagination, had its own dedicated floor. The executives claimed the seven top floors of the building – the smaller top rectangle of the Keep - known by all as The Penthouse.

Except for a few load-bearing columns, the floor plan of the newsroom was wide open. Clusters of desks were gathered in different sections of the floor, separated only by fuzzy blue fabric and metal cubicle walls that reached their residents' heads while seated. Each section had signs hanging from the ceilings over the clusters indicating which section was which. Along the outer edges of the floor, there were individual offices, conference rooms, an employee lounge, and restrooms.

In the middle of the room were the Metro and City desks. Sonny made his way toward the City Desk, where Gus worked

alone at the cubbyhole he reserved for himself, even though he had his own office on the fringe of the 12th floor.

“Gus, we’re running through what I have on the I-project with you.” Sonny said, using his own code for the data packets the mysterious woman had been sending him.

“Yeah,” Gus said, “But I’m going to need another favor from you.”

Sonny recognized the presence of a trip wire in that statement but went forward anyway. “On top of your little side project? ...OK, what do you need?”

“I need you to help babysit a new person who’s coming on staff today. I’m going to have him do some City Desk duties, but I thought he could help you out, too. Here’s his resume.”

Sonny scanned the paper and a large sigh ran from his lungs. “Bloody hell.”

“Sonny...”

“Wait, we’re letting some... *kid* play reporter in our newsroom after all the people we cut? After all the people we’re *going* to cut?”

“We’re hiring new people every day,” Gus said, hands up in what looked like a plea, though he seemed to be defending the paper more out of habit.

“Cutting news staff, then either adding more executives or inexperienced *garbage* that can’t replace someone who’s been on the job 20 years. Tell me this isn’t some bullshit right here.” There was silence, which was Sonny’s answer. “Is he totally useless?”

“Graduated with honors at U. Chicago, MBA. The writing samples he submitted looked pretty good, actually.”

With a sigh, he declared, “OK, I’ll see what I can get him working on.”

“Always know I can count on you, Sonny.”

“I’m doing this for you, but you’d better believe you owe me.” Sonny walked backward toward his own office. “And I’m collecting soon, I don’t have time to mess around, and you don’t either.” It wasn’t until he turned to walk through his door that he saw the girl sitting at the nearest desk to his office, in the area reserved for the Arts and Entertainment Desk, staring at him with a half-smile on her face.

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She was the type of woman that earned a second look, not necessarily because she was hot but because of her uniqueness. Her eyes might have seemed a little too sleepy, her mouth a touch too wide, her nose a little too prominent, and her hips not as skinny as the current fashion gods would prefer. However, she had her own sense of fashion – a blend of pastels teamed with funky gold and silver jewelry around her neck and covering her wrists.

Then, he remembered. He remembered what he had decided to do on the way into work this morning. He was nervous, but he wasn't scared anymore. He was more scared about what would happen if he never tried it.

“Hi, Joey.” Sonny waved to her as he walked toward her. A nameplate on her desk proclaimed it belonged to JOSEPHINE HALVORSEN.

“Hi, stranger, welcome back.”

“Yeah.”

She paused for a moment. “Where were you last week? I tried to call...”

“Thanks for that, by the way... Well, my mom died.”

She sagged a little in her chair at that. “Oh, I'm sorry, Sonny,” she said, her voice a whisper.

He smiled and nodded. “It's OK. I appreciated your call. How have you been, Joey?”

“You know, same stuff,” Joey replied, reassured with Sonny's positive mood.

“Yeah. So, anything crazy been going on around here since I was out?”

She leaned toward him as he did the same, her voice parodying the gossips of the newsroom. “Well, I could tell you a few things, but we'd have to save it for drinks after work. Too hot for the office.”

Sonny laughed at that for a moment, but then it tapered off as he began to look around to see if anyone else was looking at them. “How often do you think you've dropped that line on me?”

Joey blinked for a moment as she realized Sonny was going off script. “How many times? In the time I've been

working here, maybe six or seven? And you've done it to me once or twice, as well."

"Yeah, fair enough." Eventually, Sonny sighed and looked straight at her. "What if I finally take you up on that?"

That brought her up short. "Oh, ah, OK... what was that?"

"I said... I felt... wait." He felt like he was about to trip over his words. He paused for a few seconds of silence, and then continued. "Sorry, I've trying to see if I can be an alpha male in real life, not just on the job."

"Alpha male, OK." She tried hard not to cackle, but kept her hazel eyes locked on his, not trying to avoid him. It settled him down without him realizing it. "What does that make you now, an Beta male?"

"Heh, maybe more Omega male."

"Ha-ha, all right, sorry," Joey waved him off but sneaking peeks at whether other people were looking on. "Go ahead."

"So, Joey, I'd really like to meet you after work for dinner. Since we always have good conversations at the office, I'd like to have one outside of it. That's it, that's all the poetry I have."

"OK." Her voice had shrunk but stayed clear. "You didn't have other plans?"

"Funny enough, usually every Monday I get suckered by Ed in having dinner with him at his place near Hyde Park. Kind of his way of keeping in the loop. I'll reschedule for tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah, Ed Mazur, right? I've seen his pictures all over this place."

"He's semi-retired, sticks to his house nowadays. He was one of the guys that showed me the ropes around here..."

"...him and Jack DeFoe, I remember you said that," she finished for him.

"Yeah. Listen, I hope you don't mind, but I'd prefer to meet there, wherever we go, rather than leave here together. Would that be a problem?"

Joey glanced at him, amused. "I didn't know you were that discreet, given some other people I heard you've dated around here."

"It's a good thing the ones I did date moved on," Sonny laughed. "That's part of it, but that's not the main reason." He

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lowered his voice. "I'll explain it to you. But, could we talk about it at dinner?"

That got her attention, her expression a mix of nervousness and curiosity. She sat still in her chair, her eyes focused down on her desk, before turning to look at him.

"Sounds cloak and dagger," she whispered to him.

"Harry Carey's work for you? We could meet there, then go to Navy Pier, take a boat ride for a while and chill out."

"So, why now?"

"I really wanted to ever since we got into that conversation a few months back about media bias, Laurie Anderson's music, Werner Herzog's films, and God knows what else, but I was too chicken until now."

She leaned back in her desk chair. He could tell Joey was trying to act cool and collected, but he could sense the wheels turning behind her eyes.

"Quick question." She made a big show of getting out her reading glasses and giving him the once-over. "You're not too old for me, right? I'm too young to be dating grandpa material."

"Naw, I'm..."

"Thirty-two, that's right," she said at the last minute. Sonny had to shake his head. "Just five years older."

"Twenty-seven, then? Good, I hate jailbait."

She laughed at that. "OK, that was worth a meal. Why so nervous around me? You're always so take-charge when you talk with people on the phone."

"Well, I never have to worry about hurting those guys' feelings."

"Ok. Well, meet you there."

With a wave, Sonny made his way into his office. Josephine waited until he was inside before shaking her head and grinning in disbelief. "The fuck?" she whispered to herself.

Five minutes after that conversation, Colton walked into the newsroom. He saw Gus perched on top of a workstation in

the City Desk den. He'd already had his shirt sleeves rolled up as he loomed over a reporter typing up a story.

As Colton got closer, he heard him say, "OK, does that mean if the city gets the money, they'll be able to make it work? Is that what they said, or are we just assuming that?"

The reporter, a skinny pale kid that looked not too much older than Colton, looked up, started to say something, and then finally shrugged his shoulders in submission.

"So, what's going to happen?" The kid pulled out his cell phone and started dialing. "Exactly."

Gus turned to face Colton. "Colton, right?" He reached out and shook his hand. "Gus Pulaski, city editor. Early today."

"I wanted to make sure I was on time."

"Fair enough. I'm going to let Kerry here get this taken care of. Let's head on over here and talk," he said, nodding his head toward his office.

"OK."

All the individual offices had cubicle-fabric walls with glazed glass doors. Gus's office was cozy rather than cramped. His narrow vertical window faced out toward Lake Michigan. A second desk and a sofa on the other side took up much of the rest of the space.

Gus indicated Colton should sit down on the sofa. "So, I've looked at some of the writing samples you submitted." Gus scanned several sheets of paper. "They looked pretty good."

"Thank you."

Gus gave him a look-over. He'd been waiting for the kid to act like he owned the place, but it hadn't happened so far. "OK, I'm going to see if I can be straight with you, and I'm expecting you to do the same."

"Yes." Colton nodded.

Gus sighed, laid the papers down on his desk, and leaned toward Colton over his folded arms. "Why do you want to go and play reporter?"

Colton hesitated for a moment. "I want to get to know everything this company does, and that includes newsgathering. I did a summer internship at the outdoor advertising division, so this isn't any different."

After a few quiet moments, Gus finally nodded. "OK."

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“That’s it?”

“Oh, definitely; you’re in.” Gus laughed. “With the cuts we’ve just had, we can use any extra hands.”

“Fine by me. I don’t want to just hang around.”

“This is not going to be one of those ‘take time and show you the ropes’ situation. It’s going to be more of a ‘throw you into the middle of the Arctic and see if you can fish’ situation, *capish?*”

“Ah, yeah.” Colton nodded, even though he didn’t know that last word. “Am I going to be working at the City Desk or somewhere else?”

“Partly. For now, I’ll have you working mornings at the desk, checking the police blotter or other things. During the afternoons, I was thinking it might be useful to have you work with one of our columnists. Basically, helping with some legwork, things like that.”

“OK. Who do you want me to work with, Carlton, or one of the sports columnists?” Sean Carlton was the paper’s top political columnist, one of the few remaining Buckleyite moderate conservatives remaining in the wild.

“No, I’m going to pair you with someone else. We’ll go over and meet him.”

“Turner? No, I never really heard of him,” Colton said as he followed Gus across the newsroom.

“He started working on the city desk eight years ago, then conned me and Jack DeFoe into doing a column, not that we weren’t overflowing with columnists at the time,” Gus said.

“*The Jack DeFoe?*”

Gus nodded. “He was still editor-in-chief back then. Anyway, he starts off writing like the next Royko or Mazur, but he built on that, started writing about ‘online lifestyles,’ how people spent their time on the Web, how the Web connected to people in real life. He mixes politics into it. Recently, he’s been doing a lot of media criticism, how he thinks journalism should work.”

“So, he messed up?” Colton was unsure if he was being stuck with someone on the editor’s blacklist.

Gus laughed. “The Penthouse doesn’t know what to think of him, but they leave him alone. He’s been driving a lot of unique visitors to the Web site and all our Web and phone survey data says he’s the only guy in our paper anyone under 40 bothers to read that doesn’t talk about sports. As long as he’s not committing felonies... OK, here he is.”

They stopped at another door and Gus knocked. “Come in,” Sonny growled from behind the door.

Sonny’s office was half the size of Gus’s cubbyhole. He hunched over a laptop on one end of an L-shaped desk while file folders and papers covered the other end facing the door. Two stuffed chairs faced the desk, and an old steel desk was tucked next to the filing cabinets covering the left-hand wall.

Sonny Turner got up, then froze, hands on hips, as he saw who was accompanying Gus into his office. “Sonny,” Gus began, “this is...”

“Colton, right? Go ahead and have a seat.” As Colton looked down to find his seat, Sonny mouthed the words “I hate you” to Gus as he took the other seat.

“Mr. Pulaski – ah, Gus – he suggested that you might need some assistance with your column,” Colton said.

Sonny sat down as Gus took a seat beside Colton. “So, will you work at the City Desk then, too?”

“City Desk mornings, then some work with you during the afternoons for now,” Gus specified.

“So, Colton here has the option of doing the job of two people and having no life or doing the job of two people half-assed and having a life. Just like nearly everyone else here.” Sonny grinned at that.

“I’ll be the first type of person rather than the last one. I can always have a life later,” Colton said without hesitation.

That earned a laugh and a shrug from Sonny. “OK, Gus said you were game, at least... Gus, where do you want the kid to set up shop?”

“Well, there might be room for him out there, but I was thinking you could just install him in the spare desk in here,”

Jason Liegois

as he waved his hand at the steel antique. “He’ll be in here a lot, anyway.”

To Gus’s surprise, Sonny nodded. “Sure, we can squeeze him in. Do you think we can get him a phone line and a chair that’s not made out of rotten wood?”

“I’ll talk to Maintenance and have them get on it. Sonny, when did you want to talk about that other thing?”

“I was thinking four, maybe.”

“Sounds good; we’ll do it in my office.”

“OK. Listen, I know you want the kid to tag along with you – can I talk to him for a few minutes before he heads back out?”

“Sure.” As soon as Gus walked out and closed the door, Sonny turned to Colton. “OK, so, you’re in the Army now.”

“Yep.”

Turner got up and started to pace behind his desk as much as the limited space allowed. “What do you know about reporting?”

Colton leaned back in the overstuffed, fraying chair, deep in thought. “Well, my professors always said I did a great job with my research papers. But as far as what you guys do every day, I admit I don’t know that much.”

“Good. That’s the first step of reporting – figuring out what you don’t know about your subject.”

“What are you working on right now? I’d be willing to help any way I could...”

“A lot of the stuff I’m currently working on, I need to keep close to the vest,” Sonny interrupted. “Before I even consider...” He stopped pacing and started to stare at one of the walls of his office. “You see those pictures?”

Colton looked at the pictures. There were some old-time shots mixed in with recent ones. “Yeah?”

“Task #1, is that I want you to figure out the identities of the first eight people at the top of the wall. By the end of the day.”

Colton looked at the photos. There was a hard-eyed man with hair neatly parted down the middle, an older man who resembled nothing less than a good-natured garden gnome, and someone who appeared to be a retired diamond thief, all

on the left side of the wall. The other half had a white-haired woman in Victorian dress, a balding man with sunglasses and a cigarette holder, a similar-looking man, except in cartoon format with a spider tattoo on his head and glasses with one red and one green lens, and a crumpled fireplug of a man who smiled mostly with his eyes. “How do I do that?”

“Well, I’ll leave that up to you. However, you have to tell me their names at 4:30 – no notes. Second, take a look at this.”

Sonny pushed a paper across his desk and into Colton’s line of sight. Colton looked down and saw this on the paper:

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“I need you to explain to me the importance of that symbol.”

“And that needs to be taken care of by 4:30 today.”

“Exactly.”

“Anything else you need by the end of today?”

“No, not really.” He moved from behind the desk to shake Colton’s hand. “Good luck with Gus today – he shouldn’t run you too ragged.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you at one.”

As Colton walked out and closed the door, Sonny muttered to himself, “Goddamn, save us from all the noobs.”