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CQ/CX

Gabe McKinley

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

SAMUEL
FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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CQ/CX was first produced by the Atlantic Theater Company at the Peter Norton Space on January 25, 2012 in New York City. The performance was directed by David Leveaux, with sets by David Rockwell costumes by Jess Goldstein, lighting by Ben Stanton, sound by David Van Tieghem, and projections by Peter Nigrini and C. Andrew Bauer. The Production Stage Manager was Jenna Woods. The cast was as follows:

JAY BENNETT	Kobi Libii
JACOB SHERMAN	Steve Rosen
MONICA SORIA	Sheila Tapia
HAL MARTIN	Arliss Howard
GEARALD HAYNES	Peter Jay Fernandez
JUNIOR	David Pittu
FRANK KING	Larry Bryggman
BEN	Tim Hopper

CHARACTERS

JAY BENNETT – Reporter, African American, early 20s

JACOB SHERMAN – Reporter, Jewish, 20s

MONICA SORIA – Reporter, 20s

HAL MARTIN – Executive Editor, 50s

GEARALD HAYNES – Editor, African American, 50s

JUNIOR – Publisher, Jewish, late 40s

FRANK KING – Editor, 60s

BEN – Editor, 50s

ACT I

1

(A dark conference room at The New York Times.)

(A slide show is going on. Out of the darkness a picture is projected before the audience.)

(First slide: A picture of a young black woman, she gazes off into the distance.)

(A man's voice, JUNIOR, narrates the slide show.)

VOICE. How do you identify a story?

(a click)

(Second slide: The same picture of the woman, but not cropped, it shows the woman in a soup line, she gazes at food being slopped on a plate.)

(a click)

(Third slide: A hole in the ground, obviously caused by an explosion.)

What is its context?

(a click)

(Fourth slide: The same picture of the hole, only not cropped. We see a baby's tattered shoe next to the hole.)

How does a story change?

(a click)

(Fifth slide: a photo of a child, a little girl, crying. The child reaches out for something unseen.)

(a click)

(Sixth Slide: The same photo of the crying baby girl, now it is revealed that she reaches for her father, who is taken away in handcuffs.)

(The lights come up to reveal a conference room at the Times. JUNIOR, the publisher, speaks out to some seen or unseen fresh faced young reporters, this is the incoming group of interns.)

(JUNIOR, a bookish man in his 40s, looks younger than he is, but is betrayed by a few gray hairs. Born rich and smart, JUNIOR has a schoolboy charm and a self-effacing manner.)

JUNIOR. What these pictures should illustrate is the importance of a comprehensive view toward the gathering and reporting of news here at the paper. They're mnemonic devices reminding you to always take the time to look at the whole picture, because, as cliché as it sounds, there is always another side to the story. Also, no such thing as an easy answer and there is always another question to ask, another phone call to make...and don't worry about the phone bill, because I'll pay it... I'm good for it. *(laughing at his own joke)* My father began this program in 1984 when he was publisher. It was one of his great passions, he originally established it for members of minority groups who had been historically excluded from opportunities in America's newspaper industry. The program is open to everybody now, but remains an integral part of our commitment to recruit and hire as diverse and as highly qualified a staff as possible. We think we've accomplished these goals with this remarkable group of interns. Ten young journalist. Just ten of you, chosen from hundreds of applicants, to make up the 1998 Reston, Rosenbaum and Morgan fellows.

(JUNIOR applauds them.)

Now, that'll officially be the last time you are ever called fellows here in the newsroom. More often than not you will be called interns or more probably, "hey kid"...or

“hand me that,” or my favorite, “where is my copy?” Or any number of far less glamorous nomenclature. Now...*now* the real work begins. You’re each going to be assigned to different desks and departments where you’ll be expected to learn and more importantly *produce*. We have three hundred and seventy-five staff writers, four hundred editors and over four hundred other news designers and clerks working in our various newsrooms and bureaus. We have sixteen bureaus in New York State, eleven national news bureaus, twenty-five foreign news bureaus. The paper has been awarded over eighty Pulitzer Prizes in journalism...and now we have...you. We are the first thing the President of the United States reads every morning. At the end of this internship, some of you will be asked to return as intermediate reporters...some of you won’t. But, right now, you have an opportunity. My family has been publishing this paper since 1896, so this is more than a business, it is more than a newspaper...it’s a legacy. Welcome to the The New York Times. Welcome you to my family.

(The sounds of presses running, motion, speed pulsing into...)

2

(Office sounds. The newsroom of the Times. Editors hunched over computers.)

(BEN, the Metro Desk editor, stares intently at his screen. He speaks to an unseen CLERK.)

BEN. Can you get me Jay Bennett?

GERALD. *(off stage)* Ben? Where's Ben?

(A short moment passes and GERALD Haynes approaches BEN's desk. He is confident and urgent.)

(GERALD, a sturdy black man in his 50s. GERALD is the first black member of the Times masthead, its top editors; a hard fought victory. On first impression, GERALD is an intimidating presence. Large in stature, he oozes an authority won, in part, by a contained rage. Despite this, GERALD is most disarming when he smiles, which isn't often.)

Ben, can we talk.

BEN. It's not a good time, Gerald.

GERALD. Can we make it a good time?

BEN. What's this about?

GERALD. What do you think it's about?

BEN. I know...you want David for the series on race, but I can't spare him.

GERALD. It's one essay, Ben.

BEN. Yeah. Two thousand words. Travel. I'd have to detach him, and I can't afford to. I need him for the daily...it comes out, ya know, every day.

GERALD. He wants to write it.

BEN. I need him. Wait, he told you he wants write something? Do me a favor and go through me, Gerald.

GERALD. I don't have to, Ben.

CLERK. *(off stage)* Bennett on one.

BEN. *(to GERALD)* Can this wait?

GERALD. No.

BEN. You can't have David. He is one of my best writers and it's my call. I have state budget gridlock and a possible transit strike and...

GERALD. You're not going to scuttle this series.

BEN. And you're not going to scuttle the metro desk for some... *(stopping himself)* I don't want to scuttle your series. Now, I gotta go...

(BEN looks at his phone.)

(to CLERK)

There is nobody on one.

GERALD. For some...what? What are your thoughts on the race series, Ben? Not a big enough issue for you?

BEN. Give me a break, I have the page one meeting...

GERALD. How would you describe the race expose?

BEN. As a vanity project. Okay?

(to CLERK)

Can you get me Bennett again?

GERALD. I know we had our differences in Washington.

BEN. This has nothing to do with Washington. It has to do with the fact that I need David here, where he works. Find another writer.

(JAY, 20s, African American, arrives at BEN's desk, oblivious to the rising tension.)

JAY. You needed me?

BEN. Just a sec... I'm sorry, Gerald.

GERALD. This is personal.

BEN. It would make it so much easier if it was, wouldn't it? It's numbers. You know that. You had this same job...

JAY. I'll come back.

BEN. Just wait.

GERALD. It was a courtesy, that I even asked permission.

BEN. Then go to Joe. Ask him. But you know how I feel and where I stand.

GERALD. This isn't over.

(**GERALD** storms away. **BEN**, oblivious, is back to his computer.)

BEN. I'm sorry about that Jeff.

JAY. Jay.

BEN. I was reading your summary of the mall story. It's...

JAY. What?

BEN. This is good. The quote from the deputy mayor is fantastic. "It's a real long shot to think that tourists would choose Elizabeth, N.J., over Manhattan," Deputy Mayor Randy Levine said. "I mean, who gets on a plane and says, 'Honey, let's go fly to Elizabeth.'" (*beat*) That's a good quote, Jay...very good quote. They should give you an editor's award just for getting the deputy mayor on the phone after three on a Friday.

JAY. I checked on Alta Vista and was able to find his personal cell number on a contact list for his kid's school.

BEN. Alta Vista?

JAY. The search engine...the...internet.

BEN. That information is on the web?

JAY. You just have to know where to look.

BEN. Hm. Nothing better than a little New York versus New Jersey story. We sure this Jersey mall is bigger than the mall in Minnesota? Doesn't that one have a roller coaster in it?

JAY. I'm waiting on a call from this... (*checking his notes*) ...International Council of Shopping Centers on the actual figures.

BEN. Can you email me the lede for the page one meeting? I'm gonna offer it. Joe loves this stuff. Okay. Get to work. You got to finish the story if you want us to publish it. Get out of here.

CLERK. (*off stage*) Who is Jay Bennett? We have a call.

JAY. Right here. Extension 7071. Two seconds.

BEN. Send me the top of your story right *now*.

(JAY runs off to catch the call. BEN stares at his screen, to his papers, preparing to leave for a meeting.)

(BEN stands shouting to unseen editors.)

Is this the right version of the shooting story in Backfield? It looks old. I don't know, it says you were the last to touch it. I didn't. So it's good? I'm gonna offer SHOOT, SLAY and MALL. The intern, Bennett, wrote it. He is sending me the top right now.

CLERK. *(off stage)* Gerald Haynes on one.

(BEN answers.)

BEN. Gerald, ya know, I've thought it over and I've decided...I'm not going to let you have David for the race series. Can I put you on hold?

(BEN slams the phone down, hanging up on GERALD.

BEN picks up the phone and dials.)

Jay, it's Ben. That hasn't landed yet. I need that...

(BEN hangs up and is getting ready to leave, when JAY returns.)

JAY. Ben...

BEN. Did you send that? I need that, I'm late for the meeting.

(to CLERK)

Are you printing the ledes?

JAY. I just got off the phone with that council, and they are disputing the developers' numbers. They say that the square footage of the mall only makes it the sixth largest in the state of New Jersey.

BEN. Okay then. I gotta run.

JAY. So you're not going to offer it for page one?

BEN. The sixth largest mall in New Jersey is not a page one story...not even in a Saturday paper. Give me four hundred great words, and we'll get it in the city edition.

JAY. Four hundred? Wait.

BEN. That's the way it is... It's the facts of the story. You did good work. That was just a correction waiting to happen.

JAY. Is there another angle, maybe?

BEN. Did you CQ it?

JAY. CQ?

BEN. Cadit Quaestio. The question falls. The facts have been checked. Sometimes the sixth largest mall in New jersey is just the sixth largest mall in New Jersey.

(BEN walks away, stops, returns.)

That's a great quote. I'll make sure to offer it as quote of the day. Page two. It's a hell of a lot closer than page B13, which is where the story is going to end up. And...Jay?

JAY. Yeah.

BEN. It's an office, and the Times. Could you wear something a little more appropriate to work?

(BEN, with little regard, exits. JAY lingers in the distance.)

CLERK. *(off stage)* Ben, Gerald on one. Ben, Gerald Haynes is on line one.

3

(Smith's Bar. The class of interns, now intermediate reporters, drink and talk.)

(MONICA Soria, 20s, a Texas girl of Mexican descent.)

(JACOB Sherman, 20s, a New York native.)

(Nearby, FRANK King sits, he's a few drinks in. He stares at the an early edition of the next day's paper. He takes care to look at every word, every story, headline and page layout. He studies it like a religious man would a holy book. He is methodical and caring.)

JACOB. How do you know?

JAY. We're all former Reston reporting fellows here, are we not? I'm a natural reporter. It's in my eyes. Jacob Sherman, son of Martin and Gloria Sherman of Ocean Parkway. Father was a CPA, mother taught eighth grade at P.S. 130... As a boy, your mother used to bring you to work sometimes, and the memory of the sweet young girls in your mother's class and the darkness between their thighs still keeps you up at night.

JACOB. I told you that in confidence, J. Edgar.

MONICA. Don't worry Jacob, I'm sure those girls are thinking of you too.

JAY. Look me in the eyes cub reporter Monica Soria, of Lackland Terrace, just inside the 410 on the west side of San Antonio...

MONICA. You are good.

JAY. Your dad, Manny, was a mechanic, and your mother Lucia raised the kids, but made extra money cleaning houses in the Alamo Heights neighborhood, lovingly referred to as "Alamo Whites." You lost your virginity in the eleventh grade to Tyler...

MONICA. Don't you dare.

JACOB. Tyler? Tyler who? Come on.

MONICA. What about you, Jay? Who are you?

(JAY just smiles.)

JAY. Nothing to say. Okay, here is a secret...a real secret...
I'm in love.

MONICA. Oh, that's good. With whom?

JAY. Well, everyday I walk across the Brooklyn Bridge to get to the Police bureau, and every day I stop...*and* I am suspended over the East River looking out at the city, and the port and the clouds and the... It's amazing...
I'm in love with the city.

MONICA. Boo.

JACOB. Look at Jay...he's Nick Carraway in Gatsby, on fire for the city. Wide eyed and lovely. I'm envious of that feeling. I grew up here, born with bagel in hand, I'll never have that awe of coming to New York.

MONICA. To New York and all its first impressions.

(They toast.)

I want Times gossip. Who is the next executive editor?

JACOB. Bill. He has it all, he comes from the Foreign Desk, he has the requisite Pulitzer, he's been managing editor...tall, very good looking...

JAY. No. I tell you guys...Hal is the pick...he is going to arrive on his white steed and clean that place up...

JACOB. I say, I say...Foghorn Leghorn? That makes about as much sense as Little Bush Junior, who is going to be the next president.

(FRANK notices something, running it over in his head.)

MONICA. Right on time. Two drinks and the liberal paranoia begins...

JACOB. President George W. Bush, get use to it...it's gonna happen. I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Jay...

FRANK. Do you guys work at the New York Times?

JACOB. ...Americans are fucking idiots.

FRANK. Yeah you do. Who's got a phone? A phone. A mobile... I need to use someone's phone. Can I...?

(JAY fishes for and the retrieves his cell, handing it to FRANK, who looks at the phone, trying to operate it.)

How does this...? How the fuck does this fucking thing work?

(JAY takes the phone, manipulating the device.)

Call the News Desk. Extension 1726...

(JAY does, handing the phone over. FRANK flops down next to the young writers.)

(into phone)

Bob? Can I speak to Bob? Bob, it's Frank. Look, there's a typo in the marijuana story on A12. Apple twelve. The pot story. Third graph, half way down. You see it. The sentence with the local "officials officials." Yeah. Also check the age on the Kramer Obit, I saw the AP has him at 87. I don't know...yeah. Fucking amateur hour over there. Would you hang that up for me? Thanks.

JAY. It's ten till one. Isn't the paper closed?

FRANK. They slowed down the presses for updates on California wildfires.

MONICA. Will that fix make any papers?

FRANK. A few. Three dots. Hopefully the one on the publisher's door. You want a drink?

(MONICA and JACOB decline.)

Sarah, I'll have another Bombay Dry, up with olives, and...

JAY. Glenlivet neat.

FRANK. A Glenlivet neat? A scotch man. That shit'll kill you. You're a clerk?

JAY. No. Writer. Intermediate. Jay Bennett. Metro.

FRANK. Bennett? Oh. I've seen your byline. You wrote the story about the carpenter getting crushed over here.

JAY. Yeah. It's sad.

FRANK. It's news. Frank King, nice to meet you.

MONICA. Monica Soria...

FRANK. City section, some metro, right?

JACOB. Jacob Sherman.

FRANK. Business desk. Mr. World Wide Web... I know your work. You kids are in the paper a lot. They really let you write now. Used to take years to get a byline...now they hand them out like candy.

JAY. Are you a reporter?

FRANK. Writing is for young men. I'm an editor, I guess...

JAY. What desk do you work at?

FRANK. Me? All of them. None of them. I float around. I've been put out to pasture. I catch typos now. I started as a copy boy forty-three years ago, in March. It's the only job I've ever had. It used to be the grey lady, now the only thing grey is me.

JAY. I never want to work anywhere else.

FRANK. A Timesman, huh? A lifer, because that's what it is...it's a life. Sarah where is that scotch for the thirsty lifer here? They don't drink in the newsroom like they used to... I mean they still put it away, but when I was coming up...oh, man, bottles on the desk, not hidden in a drawer, mind you. Used to be this girl that'd come through and sell sandwiches and beer for lunch... right into the eighties. More likely to find jogging shoes than a bottle of booze nowadays.

JAY. I like those old ways. Hounding. Getting the story. Work hard, play hard. Real...journalism. I wish I could have been born then.

FRANK. You probably don't, really. It wasn't all Woodward and Bernstein. It was... *(beat)* Paul Delaney was the first African American person I ever saw in the newsroom for a long time...not a lot of women either, not because of any... Brilliant men all over...it was just...it

was just different...different times. I should go. Sarah, put those on my tab.

(FRANK takes one last look at the paper.)

Well, guys, I don't know what to tell you. It's a great place to work. Hard to believe that one day...probably... they won't even publish this thing...something that I devoted my entire adult life to will be...gone. They'll tear it down and build a bowling alley.

JAY. There will always be the Times.

FRANK. You think so?

MONICA. Yes. I mean maybe not like this...but the important stuff...the news...I'm sorry, maybe I'm a little drunk...but the heart, the truth...will be disseminated somehow. Electronically, whatever comes next.

FRANK. Oh, to be young. To have so much...idunno what. I'm just feeling nostalgic. (beat) When I first started working there...my first job was to go down at night and get the papers off the presses, that was when they were still down on the ground floor, and it.. was..amazing. These huge machines...these steel giants, moving so fast. Watching those presses run... watching the papers fly out of them...and I thought, I thought...this is it. This is the pinnacle. This is the future. I'd take the papers up to the editors, and they were still warm...like a newborn baby...and the way the newsprint got on your fingers like...blood... It was a holy thing. Truth and blood. It'll break my heart when it...

JAY. It won't. It's safe.

FRANK. Yeah? Well, that's good. I gotta catch my train or my wife will kill me. One too many Manhattan sleep-overs for me over the years.

JAY. I'll see you around, Frank. Any advice?

FRANK. Change is coming. All you can do is hope the next group of editors, the new masthead, takes a liking to you. Be careful, this place will eat you up if you let it. It'll smash you flat...like that construction worker from your story. Have two for me.

(**FRANK** *exits.*)

JAY. Sarah, one more! I'm in love.

4

(The hall of Pulitzer Prizes. Eleventh floor of the Times. Plaques commemorating all the Pulitzer Prizes in Journalism awarded to the paper over the years.)

(A moment passes and JUNIOR and HAL Martin enter.)

(HAL Martin, 50s, southern gentleman as always, replete in a light suit and his signature panama hat.)

(The two men take in the years of awards, a leisurely stroll.)

JUNIOR. It's funny, I used to be frightened of the Pulitzer Prize hallway when I was child. It was... The faces of all these old men staring down on me.

HAL. Old men? That's me right there. Ghosts everywhere you look.

JUNIOR. You'd think I'd be used to it. I walk by a bust of my great grandfather - looking through me - in the lobby every morning.

HAL. Must be a hell of a feeling.

JUNIOR. I've been Publisher for almost three years, before that I was preparing for this job...my entire life, working, learning almost every position from the bottom up. And yet, I still feel...

HAL. There is nothing as heavy in this world as the weight of a birthright, Junior.

JUNIOR. You always make me feel so inarticulate, Hal. But, then again, I was never much of a writer, was I?

HAL. Honestly? No, you were never much of a writer, Junior, and that is being kind.

(The men laugh at this.)

But it doesn't matter, you're meant to be the Publisher. That's your calling. I look at you now, and I see a man in bloom.

JUNIOR. You've been head of editorial for how long?

HAL. Seven years. Seven years of opinions.

JUNIOR. Can I ask for one more? *(beat)* An opinion?

HAL. I don't know that you'd want it, but shoot.

JUNIOR. Joe isn't going to be editor indefinitely. When the time comes, it'll be my first important hire.

HAL. Bill will be fine, when the time comes. If that is what you're asking?

JUNIOR. No. Not specifically. I mean. *(beat)* Is that what they're saying? That it's a forgone conclusion... Bill, I mean?

HAL. A blind man could see he's been groomed, Junior. He'll be just fine. He is a man of a moment, perfectly present tense. Besides, isn't he your...? What does your father think?

JUNIOR. I don't know what he thinks, he's no longer Publisher.

HAL. A man in bloom. *(beat)* You know what I see when I look at these walls?

JUNIOR. What?

HAL. A museum. Annals forged by others. History...already written. What I don't see is the future. Do you see it?

JUNIOR. I think so.

HAL. I think you do. You'll do the right thing, Junior. I know it.

(They continue their stroll.)

5

(The Metro desk on deadline. Phones ring while editors shout over cubicles. Controlled chaos.)

(BEN hunches over his keyboard, the computer's monochrome screen illuminates him. Nearby, JAY, hovers with a notebook in hand. He dictates to BEN.)

(BEN, having taken the reigns on the story, has JAY's article up. Perhaps it is illuminated above...cursor blinking endlessly.)

BEN. Your nut graph is too low, you're burying it.

JAY. Nut graph?

BEN. Yes. The graph that tells the reader why it is important to read the story and how the story fits in history. I'm moving it up. Also, this anecdotal lede has to go, it reads like the fucking Wall Street Journal.

JAY. Okay, but...

BEN. *(reading)* "The Rev. Al Sharpton yesterday denounced Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's *unyielding* crackdown on homeless people and called *strenuously* on New Yorkers to monitor and report police efforts to sweep the homeless off the streets." Jay, what is with all the verbiage? Christ almighty...

JAY. I'm sorry?

BEN. Is the crackdown really "unyielding?" Is it unable to bend? Is that what you're saying?

JAY. No. I...

BEN. No. *(beat)* And did Sharpton actually call "strenuously?" Did it take *great energy to do it?* Or did he *just call* for this protest?

JAY. He was very...

BEN. The man protests every time Rickey Henderson gets thrown out at home plate... Is he more strenuous than every other time? Come on.

JAY. Well, wait...

BEN. It is inaccurate writing, Jay. This is the Times, we use unassailable language, always. Just say what happened, simply and accurately, please. Report, don't write. *(beat)* We are writing the first draft of history, respect that. Do you understand?

(A unseen CLERK shouts to the duo.)

CLERK. *(off stage)* News Desk on one! Ben, News Desk on one.

(BEN picks up the phone and then hangs it up without ever bringing it to his ear.)

BEN. Okay. Okay, are we good to go?

CLERK. *(off stage)* News Desk on one! It's Bob.

(BEN again picks up the phone and hangs it up.)

BEN. Okay, can I set this?

JAY. No. I have a great quote for the kicker.

(FRANK appears.)

FRANK. Bob needs the Sharpton story. It is holding up page one.

BEN. It's coming.

FRANK. Seventy-five grand a minute after deadline, Ben. You wanna pay the union overtime?

BEN. What did I just say, Frank?

CLERK. *(off stage)* News Desk on one.

FRANK. Ben, he's threatening to kill the story and run a house ad.

BEN. Bullshit! Jay just got back from this press conference, we have fresh news. We are WORKING HERE!

(FRANK retreating.)

FRANK. Not my money.

BEN. I need that kicker, Jay!

JAY. *(slowly)* "In the spirit of Martin Luther King," he said, "we'll park our tents in City Hall Park and tell Mayor

Giuliani that we do not want to live in a city that locks up our homeless, but one that lifts up our homeless.”

(BEN types furiously.)

BEN. Great. Great. Great kicker.

(BEN finishes his key strokes with authority.)

(Suddenly, there is break in the action. BEN takes a deep breath. Calm after the storm.)

CLERK. *(off stage)* News Desk on one!

(BEN ignores this, looks at JAY.)

BEN. Have you ever seen a man waste seventy-five thousand dollars, Jay?

JAY. No.

CLERK. *(off stage)* Line one, News Desk. They want the Sharpton story! News Desk on one!

(BEN looks at his watch for a full minute, or thereabouts. FRANK returns, lingering around BEN's desk, something is communicated. Tension grows with each passing second, then...)

BEN. Now you have.

(BEN hits a key on the keyboard.)

You have the Sharpton story! Set it and forget it. Goodnight.

(to FRANK)

Thanks, Frank.

(to JAY)

Congrats on page one.

(BEN exits. JAY slumps in the now-vacated seat.)

(A moment passes and JACOB arrives.)

JACOB. That was intense.

JAY. You saw that?

JACOB. The whole newsroom saw it. Guerilla theater at its best.

JAY. It's amazing.

JACOB. Is it always like this over here? Business closes early.

JAY. Working on deadline is like great...sex...or

JACOB. I was going to say we should get a drink, but maybe you need a cigarette.

JAY. The rush...it's a high.

JACOB. We build sandcastles, and we do it again tomorrow.

(JACOB clumsily drops work from under his arm.)

JAY. What's with all the photos?

JACOB. Merlin, the photo archive. I couldn't remember some details about the office of this start-up I'm writing about...so I looked at the pictures the photographer filed. Clerk prints them for me.

JAY. There is no such thing as time and space anymore. It's 1986 over here...they still think I use a typewriter. Honestly, I filed a story from my laptop at the scene of a shooting yesterday, I thought they were going burn me for practicing witchcraft.

JACOB. I don't know how you work on deadline like that. Can I ask you something? Aren't you ever scared of your cursor?

JAY. The cursor?

JACOB. Sometimes I sit here and I just stare...and...I'm terrified. It goes away, but there is a moment, almost every day, where I think... "I can't write. I can't do it." Does that happen to you?

JAY. No. Don't write, report. Make another phone call.

JACOB. I hate you. (beat) I have this recurring dream... where I'm on deadline...for what? I don't know, but it's big and I'm behind...and the phone keeps ringing and ringing but I don't pick it up, I can't even look at it. Finally it stops, but I'm soaked in sweat, in a

complete panic...and I start to cough. I cough hard until my teeth fall out in my hands and then...out of my mouth comes a ringing cell phone. Then I wake up.

JAY. First round is on me. I'm on page one.

(They exit.)

6

(The smoking room. A dingy former office, now allocated for the dwindling number of smokers left at the paper. A few chairs, tables with ashtrays heaped full of butts. There is a window that looks out onto nothing and barely allows the distant neon light from Times Square in.)

(GERALD Haynes sits and smokes in silence, lost in thought. A moment passes, and JAY enters.)

(The two men nod to one another, a simple gesture between strangers, an office hello. JAY lights a cigarette and picks up a section of the paper that is nearby, he glances at it halfheartedly. JAY, pulls deep on his smoke...)

JAY. Gerald?

GERALD. Hm?

JAY. I'm Jay Bennett. I...

GERALD. Yeah.

JAY. I'm a reporter with Metro. We met during my first orientation. Then again at a meeting of the minority hires, you gave a speech and...

GERALD. I remember, Jay. Hello.

(They each pull on their cigarettes.)

Sorry, I'm just...work on my mind.

JAY. I understand.

GERALD. Sorry. I've been in management for eight years and I still don't completely understand...nevermind. So, how's Metro treating you?

JAY. Good. Great, I mean. I'm working at the police bureau. I'm in the paper a lot.

GERALD. I know.

JAY. I guess you would. The only bad thing is...I started smoking. Just part of the lifestyle, I guess.

GERALD. What do they say? Starting is easy. Quitting is hard. I started when the Post-Dispatch sent me to Washington the first time. That was '77 or so... I've been quitting ever since.

JAY. Stress reliever. Digit to oral... I dunno. A lot of reporters smoke.

GERALD. Back then, when I started, everybody smoked. Didn't trust you otherwise... It was the only way you could get a source alone was to take a smoke break. Just the way it was.

JAY. Washington. That's... I mean.

GERALD. Washington is hazardous to your health. They should post that on the sign leading into town.

JAY. Great for your career though.

GERALD. Always news there, that's for sure.

JAY. I want to work in Washington. New York, Washington then Foreign.

GERALD. That's all? You lack ambition, son.

JAY. "A man's worth is no greater than the worth of his ambitions," Marcus Aurelius.

GERALD. "Ambition is the last refuge of failure," Oscar Wilde. There is a quote for fucking everything. (*Beat*) D.C., huh?

JAY. It's my home town, so... Yeah. My father works for the military... Pentagon. Army brat. We traveled a lot, but D.C. is home. You?

GERALD. St. Louis. MIZ-ZOU.

JAY. Missouri J-school..Great school.

GERALD. Could be. Sometimes. 1960's Missouri, man...

JAY. I imagine.

GERALD. You should have seen me, called myself Uganda X – big ol' afro. Where did we find you, Jay?

JAY. University of Maryland.

GERALD. Terrapins. Wupped the Tigers' ass this year in basketball. You and me might be the only non-Ivys around here, but at least we have basketball teams to root for. Saddest thing in the world is an Ivy League basketball game.

JAY. "A thrilling game Cornell edges Harvard, ten to eight."

(They laugh.)

Can I have a cigarette?

GERALD. Menthol, alright?

JAY. Thank you.

GERALD. You hear the joke about Kwanzaa Claus? You know, the black Santa Claus?

JAY. No.

GERALD. What do you leave out instead of milk and cookies for Kwanzaa Claus?

JAY. What?

GERALD. Pack of menthols and Kool-aid.

(They laugh.)

I love a good racist joke, they make me laugh.

JAY. Where did you hear that?

GERALD. Right here.

JAY. At the Times? Somebody told that to you?

GERALD. No. I was in the elevator. They didn't see me there...which is a feat in and of itself. So, these two guys who shall remain nameless, pop off with that joke...and I started laughing harder than either of them. You should have seen the look on their faces. Oh, boy, that was a fun eight floors up.

JAY. Amazing.

GERALD. That sorta stuff doesn't bother me. It's the little things. When I was Metro editor before getting this AME job, they used to slug all the murder stories involving young black men...so a lot of stories...they used to slug them all "Black." So every day I'd come in, turn on my computer and look on the Atex system

and see days worth of homicide stories piled up, date then slug...01back, 02black, 03black one after another...they didn't know any better. A room full of brilliant, overeducated, bleeding-heart and generally well intentioned people...they just didn't see how that could make a black person feel. *(beat)* Anyway, I got them to start slugging those stories "Slay."

JAY. Gerald, I just want to say, you are a real inspiration to us all...and all the things they say...

GERALD. What do they say?

JAY. I mean, just being the Jackie Robinson of the Times and all...

GERALD. Jackie Robinson, huh?

JAY. It just means a lot to the black employees...

GERALD. I'm not Jackie Robinson or Mother Teresa or anybody else... I'm just an Assistant Managing Editor who happens to be black, and you, my boy, are just a writer. Sure, time was, at this place they stuck the niggers in sports, the queens in culture and women could cover spring fashion, if they were lucky - everything else was covered by the landed gentry. Time was...but from the top on down, we're trying to make this newsroom reflect the diversity of the city. It's hard and may not happen fast...

JAY. Why not? Kick that door down.

GERALD. You want it all and you want it now...you remind me of... Maybe we should call you Uganda X?

(GERALD stamps out his cigarette.)

You're a talented writer, Jay. I assume you know the difference between on the record and off the record, right?

JAY. Yes, sir.

GERALD. Well this is all off...you work twice as hard as all the others, and you never open your mouth no matter what you hear, you just smile.

(GERALD smiles.)

You smile and do good work, and then and move up the ladder...where you can make a difference. Then you get home, pour a drink for you and your wife and you yell like a motherfucker about all these sonsabitches. *(Beat)* Keepworking hard, because people are watching you.

(GERALD gives JAY another cigarette and exits.)

7

(A phone call between two offices. One, the Times newsroom, the second is the Police Bureau. On one phone is BEN, on the other, JAY. Both sit in front of their computers. JAY lets the phone ring before answering it.)

JAY. *(answering)* Cop Shop. Bennett.

BEN. Jay. It's Ben.

JAY. Hey Ben, can I call you back?

BEN. Did you get my email?

JAY. Yeah. No. I mean, what?

BEN. I sent you an email about a correction.

JAY. Correction?

BEN. Yes, Jay, I sent it this morning. It's now two o'clock.

JAY. I didn't see it, Ben. I'm not in front of my computer.

BEN. Jay...

JAY. I'll check and get back to you. I do have to call you back...

BEN. Jay.

JAY. Yes, Ben.

BEN. I called your land line, not your cell. Now, can you please just look at the correction in your email? This is becoming tiresome, Jay.

JAY. I know...I know you called the land line, I just...I picked up my line at the clerk's desk.

BEN. Fine. Put me on hold, go to your desk...bring up the email so we can do this.

(JAY puts BEN on hold. JAY takes a moment then checks his email. JAY then picks up the phone again.)

JAY. What is the email called?

BEN. The subject is "CX," meaning correction. Just like the previous three times, Jay. It's from your Monday shooting story.

JAY. I don't...oh, here it is. Oh, yeah. So.

BEN. The correction is saying the perp is from the Bronx, not Jersey as you reported, and the victim, we are identifying as the son of the owner of the store, not the owner. This is pretty basic stuff here, Jay.

JAY. I'm checking my notes. Can you just hold on a sec...

(JAY puts BEN on hold. He takes a minute, flipping through a reporters' pad. JAY takes BEN off of hold.)

I...ah...yeah. Yeah. This is my bad. I mixed up some old notes here, I guess. First reports were that the victim was the owner of the jewelry shop...then later the father, who actually own the shop, found the body...so, yeah...the kid just worked there.

BEN. Does the correction read all right? I mean, are we straight now?

JAY. Yeah. We are...I'm sorry. I just.

BEN. You know the Times doesn't have fact checkers, right? Aside from the copy and backfield desks, it's an honor system for the reporters.

JAY. I know.

BEN. Your work has been slipping, Jay. It isn't acceptable. Now I know you have had some editing corrections, but this is too much... This is a reoccurring problem...

JAY. I know. I've been diligent about my notes.

BEN. You've been exceedingly sloppy. I want to have a sit down with you and Nancy, it's just not acceptable.

JAY. I know. It won't happen again.

BEN. If you have a problem, if there is something going on that I need to know about, let me know.

JAY. I've just been working really hard. Really.

BEN. I understand that. We're all working *really* hard, Jay. Okay? We all are. Is Nancy still your 8i supervisor?

JAY. Yes.

BEN. I'm gonna email Nancy and set something up.

JAY. Okay. If you feel like this is necessary.

BEN. Shape up, Jay, or you're not going to be at the Times much longer.

(BEN hangs up. JAY, receiver in hand, crumbles.)

8

(A restaurant dinner table. HAL and GERALD, martinis half gone, a dinner before them.)

GERALD. Since '83, when I came over from Post-Dispatch for the election.

HAL. That's right. You had to follow H.W. Bush for how long? You poor sonofabitch. Well, it could have been worse, you could have been assigned Walter Mondale, he might have bored you straight to death, then you wouldn't be here today.

(They laugh.)

Feels a lot longer, like a lifetime ago, but also...no time at all.

GERALD. Strange how that happens. Sentiment aside...may I ask?

HAL. I'm sorry?

GERALD. We've known each other long enough to be forthright with one another. *(beat)* I like our meals, Hal, but there is usually a reason for them.

HAL. There's the man I'm looking for. Direct. To the point. I've been talking to Junior...

GERALD. I know. Everybody knows, Hal.

HAL. I'm on the one yard line for the big job, Gerald, and I wanted to talk to you.

GERALD. Executive Editor. Congratulations. What do you want to talk to me about?

HAL. We always shared something, you and I, an understanding, haven't we?

GERALD. I've always thought so.

HAL. I'm going to get this job over Bill because I have sold Junior on my vision of the future of this newspaper. I'm going to need people, strong people like you, to help me implement it.

GERALD. Strong people.

HAL. I told Junior, and I firmly believe it, that the paper has gotten old and soft. That it must adapt or die. It's evolution. Pure and simple. From the top down, I'm going to change the way this paper operates. I want to kick start the paper's competitive metabolism. Reinvigorate the staff, get young hungry reporters eating and breathing their jobs again...fighting for stories, breaking news. We need to get people reading the paper with interest again – not because they feel like they have to. For years, we have been the journalistic spinach jammed down the throat of America; sure, it's good for you but it tastes like shit. It's time to change...we have to be mouth watering and delectable. This newspaper has to be irresistible. I care too much to watch it crumble to dust because it was too damn stodgy and old fashioned to change. We need better writing, better editing... I want the stories to sing and have sweep. I want better storytelling.

GERALD. And good reporting...

HAL. Of course, good reporting. But, is it too damn much to ask for a news story to read better than the back of a tube of tooth paste? I think not. They called it The Grey Lady, not because of the grey photos, but because of the grey writing. Dull and lifeless. *(beat)* We are on the precipice, my friend, it is do or die time... and I think you know it.

GERALD. Where do I fit in?

HAL. Right at the top.

GERALD. Are you offering me the managing editorship?

HAL. You know how much I respect you, Gerald. We have history. In any revolution, you need generals and soldiers. Can I count on you?

(GERALD smiles.)

9

*(The last vestiges of a small Christmas party (2000).
The three young reporters sit around a coffee table in
JAY's apartment.)*

MONICA. Oh, this again...it's bullshit, Jay...bullshit...

JACOB. Now that you started, I gotta hear it.

JAY. It's from a friend of a friend of a friend...

JACOB. So you're sourced...

JAY. According to her, Mark Greenberg, the city comptroller...

MONICA. The *married* city comptroller and democratic candidate for mayor of New York City, mind you...

JACOB. Five bucks to anybody who can tell me what a comptroller does...

JAY. Anyway, apparently the comptroller is sleeping with his secretary. And Mark likes to fuck at the office after hours, and according to this friend of mine, when they are doing it and he reaches his crescendo...

MONICA. The point of no return.

JAY. Right before he comes...he screams, "You know who you're fucking? The first Jewish President of the United States!"

MONICA. That's my favorite part. He doesn't just blurt it out once in a fit of passion...he screams it every time, it's like his catch phrase.

JAY. I think I'm going to write about it.

JACOB. What? Maybe if we worked for the Weekly World News.

JAY. Oh yeah, sex scandals involving politicians are *never* news. Just ask Bill Clinton.

JACOB. You are not serious? Because it's a rumor.

JAY. It's got great details, though.

JACOB. It's fun, but it's a rumor. *(beat)* But, then again, what do I know? Everything is backwards... Up is down, down is up. Hell, we just had a man who is seemingly handicapped steal the presidential election... I know nothing.

JAY. I know... I'm joking.

JACOB. Believe me...one day...one day, I'll cast away my allegiance to the truth and quit...write my novel and become wildly successful...then..

MONICA. Here we go...

JACOB. ...and then become an eccentric recluse out in Maine or someplace. Maybe teach a little...

MONICA. What's the novel going to be called?

JACOB. What do you think it should it be called?

MONICA. "Daddy Issues," what else? I'll believe it when I see it.

JACOB. I'm sorry, is this *so unbelievable*?

MONICA. Do you know how many unfinished novels are stashed in bottom drawers in the newsroom? Laid one on top of the other, they'd stretch from here to the moon. *(laughing)* I think it is hilarious.

JACOB. Why?

MONICA. It is *the* definition of white people problems... am I a journalist or a novelist? That a person would struggle with what "sort" of writer they are going to be... I find it hilarious. Where I grew up, the idea of being *any* type of writer is completely absurd. My mother tells my friends back home that I'm a trapeze artist, because it's more believable than me writing for a newspaper, much less one in New York City.

JACOB. And yet, my parents are still disappointed I'm not a lawyer.

MONICA. Pobrecito.

JAY. *(far away)* I've never wanted to write a novel or be a lawyer... This is what I always wanted to do. Write for the paper.

MONICA. Jay? Are you alright?

(JAY chokes back something inside, he exits the room.

MONICA and JACOB, alone now, discreetly kiss. A moment passes, and JAY returns.)

JAY. I'm sorry. After my father died, I remember reading his obituary in the paper, it was...after that... You know what I asked for that year for my birthday? The Best Newspaper Writing, 1990-91...and every year since.

(JAY reveals the well-worn book, then slams it on the coffee table. JAY slumps.)

MONICA. What's a matter honey?

JAY. They're not going to hire me.

MONICA. What are you talking about? You're in the paper all the time, doing great work.

JACOB. Did they say they weren't going to hire you?

JAY. I've...I've had a lot of corrections lately.

MONICA. Every writer has corrections.

JAY. I've had more than...I just, Monica...it's not good. I've just been writing so many fucking stories...and I'm not even important, just filling pages with shorts about shootings and rapes. Feeding the machine. CXrape, CXshoot, CX...CX...CX...the corrections. I had to have a meeting with Ben and Nancy a couple of days ago. They gave me a warning. I felt like Ben wanted to get rid of me right there.

JACOB. I thought he liked you?

JAY. Not anymore. I feel like he looks at me and... Then Nancy pointed out that my corrections fall in an acceptable statistical area. You should have seen the look on Ben's face...he wants me gone. He hates me.

MONICA. He doesn't hate you. It's going to be okay.

JAY. No, it's not. It's the fucking Times! It's my life.

JACOB. You're a good writer. You are going to be a great writer. You just need to bone up a little bit. You've got time to change minds.

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