

JUDY & STEVE

JUDY

(Approaching STEVE's desk as he types.) What do you have for tomorrow's front?

STEVE

Let's see ... I have photos from last night's school play at St. John's. Oh, and I'm just about finished with that feature about the girls competing for Pork Princess at the county fair. And believe me, most of them are real oinkers.

JUDY

Well, that sounds all warm and fuzzy, but don't we have any murder or mayhem? Readers say they like good news, but what they buy is bad news.

STEVE

(Pours the contents of a flask into his coffee.) Yeah, blood sells. Speaking of which ... I just got back from the courthouse, and holy balls, do I have a doozy for you. Turns out a guy and his sister-in-law were arguing over which movie to watch the other night, and the sister-in-law grabs a sword off the wall and stabs the guy.

JUDY

Whoa!

IMOGENE

Oh good heavens.

STEVE

And that's just the beginning. Turns out the woman had a prior record ... from when she was a man. (Singing) Doo looks like a lady! For the first time in my career, I will be able to put the phrase "sword-wielding transsexual" in print.

JUDY

We'll see what Hoffman has to say about that. I think two lawsuits are enough for one day.

STEVE

I put in a request for the guy's ... er, woman's mug shots, both pre-op and post-op.

JUDY

Well, between that and the St. John's play, we should be set for art. Not sure what Charles has cooking.

STEVE

Probably another container of those vegetarian sausages he's always munching on. They smell like the hockey team's laundry hamper.

JUDY

And probably have similar nutritional value. Can you get me your stories early tonight? Something tells me I'm going to get hauled into Hoffman's office after Malinski's call.

JUDY & STEVE

STEVE

(Into phone) Holy, holy, holy balls. Wow. Thanks a million, Stretch. Yeah, we'll keep you out of this as best we can. Later. (STEVE hangs up.)

JUDY

(As CHARLES pulls away) No kidding? Really? Wow. Ok, that's more than good enough for me. Let's go with it.

STEVE

What's going on? Did Charles just tell you who his anonymous source is? Who is it? (Silence.)

Who iiiiiiis iiiiiit?

JUDY

Absolutely not, Steve.

CHARLES

It's between me and Judy.

STEVE

Whatever. You know I'll figure it out on my own eventually. How do you think I got your Social Security number?

CHARLES

What?

STEVE

Hel-looo, it's not like I could set up a dummy bank account to hide money from my ex-wife under my own Social Security number! Duhhh.

JUDY

(Setting things back on track) What's the word from Stretch?

STEVE

You're going to love this: He tested both samples, and they're from different sources-completely different waterways. The one Charles collected is clean. The one the DNR claims is from Lester's creek is polluted, but is from some other source.

JUDY

Is Stretch sure about all this?

STEVE

Just as sure as when that nice Nigerian businessman told him he'd be rewarded for stashing some money in his bank account. It's solid. What did you get from the sheriff?

JUDY

Denials, mostly. He said his department had nothing to do with the DNR investigation, and the county harbors no grudges against Lester over Weedfest. He said his deputies were merely helping the DNR with enforcement.

CHARLES

Well, we gave them a chance to respond. That's all we can do. It appears we have both sides of the story.

JUDY

Yeah, but it makes me nervous that one side is anonymous.

STEVE

(Approaches JUDY's desk.) Come on, Judy, you knew nobody would go on the record about this. This is some serious cloak-and-dagger stuff, and heads will roll when this hits the paper.

JUDY

I'm going to have to talk to Hoffman before we put this to bed. Ok, so Charles, we're set for art, right? You shot pictures of the creek at Lester's farm?

CHARLES

Affirmative.

STEVE

I'm typing up what I got from Stretch. We shouldn't need to name him. He emailed me a PDF of his findings, so I figure we can refer to it as a "water quality analysis commissioned by the Independent."

JUDY

That's fine. I'd rather name him, but I understand he doesn't want to risk his working relationship with the DNR. I already typed up what little I got from the state agencies' spokespeople. Steve, can you edit those pieces of the story together while Charles finishes writing and I talk to Hoffman? (Steve nods)

CHARLES & STEVE

STEVE

Run this by me again. You're going to seriously contend that "Dune," one of the biggest box office bombs of all time, is an under-appreciated sci-fi classic?

CHARLES

Absolutely! Keep in mind that the film's shortcomings, such as lackluster special effects and the forced casting of Sting, were not under the purview of David Lynch. The director did the best he could with a

convoluted script. I submit that he single-handedly rescued the project to craft an epic unlike any other mainstream blockbuster.

STEVE

Whatever, man. Who's your favorite "Star Trek" captain? Kathryn Janeway?

CHARLES

Uh, no, that would be Captain Jean-Luc Picard. (Sings "Star Trek: The Next Generation" theme.)

STEVE

Oh, come on, numb nuts, nobody beats James Kirk! Go ahead and leave yourself a voicemail reminding yourself of that. (Phone rings.) Speaking of phone calls. (Picks up.) County morgue. You stab 'em, we slab 'em. (A beat.) The Independent? Never heard of it. Sure, no problem. Call us back if you happen upon any corpses.

CHARLES

Uh, are you supposed to be messing with our poor callers?

STEVE

Who cares? This whole operation is going down no matter what we do. Might as well screw with the callers and have a little fun. Give it a try. (Phone rings.)

CHARLES

(Picking up.) You've reached the third ring of hell. Head Slavemaster speaking ... Oh, hello, Mr. Malinski.

STEVE

(Taking a call of his own.) Axelson here. Yeah, that was my column. What about it? (Listens.)

CHARLES

You want Mr. Hoffman? I'm afraid he's in a meeting ... yes ... (giggling) with a Mr. Dante and one of his associates, the Prince of Darkness. Sure, I'll tell him you called, Mr. Malinski. (Hangs up, giddy and gleeful.) That was a bit of a lark!

STEVE

(Into the phone.) Dude, I KNOW the Germans didn't bomb Pearl Harbor. That was an "Animal House" reference. It's a humor column! Call me back when you develop a funny bone. (Hangs up)

JUDY, CHARLES & STEVE

CHARLES

Willard is right about the state wanting Lester off his land. But all the stuff about creek pollution and Weedfest is a red herring. A smokescreen, if you will.

JUDY

What?

CHARLES

The state does, as Willard heard, want to hit Lester with a fine so steep he'll have to give up his property. But it has nothing to do with pre-empting Weedfest.

STEVE

Says who?

CHARLES

Says my source. This source tells me the state Department of Transportation wants to reroute Highway 129 to connect to Highway 14 east of town. The only direct route runs through Lester's farm. (Sits at his desk.) It fits, because when I interviewed Lester, he said the state had approached him about selling his property multiple times, but he has refused.

JUDY

Interesting. So, who is this anonymous source?

CHARLES

I can't tell you.

STEVE

What?

CHARLES

I'm sorry, but our conversation was off the record, and I assured him of complete anonymity. He laid out the scenario, now it's up to us to find other sources to confirm what he told me. And I haven't even told you the whole story yet. (Rising) The state wants to reroute Highway 129 to facilitate heavier truck traffic, and provide readier access to Highway 14. Why? Because the county wants to place an industrial park on Lester's land, where the highways meet.

JUDY

Out with the shotgun-wielding rabble-rouser, in with a major boost to the tax base.

CHARLES

Precisely. The Department of Transportation got the Department of Natural Resources to do its dirty work. One state agency scratching another's back. (Sits again.)

JUDY

And it was the same story at the county level: The Development Authority got Sheriff Gunderson to do its dirty work and potentially bring in business.

CHARLES

Exactly. And there's one more thing, something you aren't going to like. My source showed me a list of prospective tenants who signed on to buy lots in the industrial park. Among them is Modern Media.

STEVE

Holy balls.

JUDY

Our parent company? No wonder Malinski was so interested in this story.

STEVE

Great, so running this story will get all of us fired. Like I didn't have enough trouble making rent before. You still want to go ahead with this?

JUDY

I think we have to. Maybe we can prove journalists really do have consciences.

STEVE

I don't know if I have a conscience, but I know a red-hot story lead when I hear one. How are we going to get all this confirmed?

JUDY

Charles, you're going to have to work on your source. Get Deep Throat to let us describe him as a quote-"government source"-unquote or something. Steve, where are we on the water analysis?

STEVE

Let me call Stretch. (Dials.)

JUDY

Ok. I'll talk to the sheriff, and see where I can get with the public relations hacks at the Department of Natural Resources. And I'll talk to Hoffman.

CHARLES

You want this for tonight?

JUDY

Well, we are still a daily newspaper. Problem?

CHARLES

The SCYFY Channel's "Lost Planet" marathon starts at 7.

JUDY

(Sternly) Record it.